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"DON'T DO IT, MR. HENRY MORDECAI, FOR IF YOU DO I'LL SEND YOU TO PRISON,"

Merle Monte's Last Cruise;

OR,

THE SEA ROBBER AT BAY.

A Romance of the South and Southern Waters Half a Century Ago.

Companion Story to "Merle, the Mutineer,"
"Montezuma, the Merciless," Etc.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

A MAN'S DESPAIR.

It was night upon the Southern coast.

No moon rode in the heavens, and only the stars looked down into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, that vast inland sea which has been the theater in the past three centuries of so many red deeds of war and of romantic and valorous exploits that would fill volumes if told in words of unvarnished truth.

Over the blue waters of the Mexican Sea, as the Gulf is often called, richly freighted vessels have sailed to havens along its shores, and have fled before the ruthless pirates that cruised for booty, and liked not gold unless it was won with bloodshed.

Along its shores the fierce freebooters have had their haunts, and almost any anchorage from Cedar Keys to the Rio Grande has its Indian legends of the far bygone and its story of romance in later years to tell.

It is to that far Southern shore I would transport my reader, and to a part of the coast near which the famous Lafitte, the Pirate of the Gulf, had his haunts, and was admiral of a fleet of daring outlaw cruisers that waged war on all flags and filled their holds with treasure instead of merchandise.

But at a period later than the days of Lafitte my story begins, and when the flag of the freebooter had become almost a thing of the past, though it was true now and then some daring rover would recklessly strive to better his fortunes by still cruising for gold, no matter how desperate his chances to end his life at the rope-end and from the yard-arm of one of Uncle Sam's swift cruisers, which, more than all else, the world should thank for the suppression of piracy upon the high seas.

Upon the banks of a bayou, a few leagues from the Mississippi Delta, a man was bound to a tree.

The starlight showed that he wore handcuffs, and that ropes passed from his elbows around the stout trunk of the tree, and also encircled his lower limbs, making him secure beyond all possibility of escape without aid.

Only a few feet from the waters of the bayou he was bound as they rolled sluggishly to an inlet a quarter of a mile below, which in turn emptied into the Gulf a third of a league beyond.

The banks of the bayou or lagoon were low,

and out of the rich black earth grew stately trees, towering high in air, and with every branch festooned with the gray funereal moss so common in the far South.

As seen in the darkness, the man was well formed, had a bearded face, and the evening star, piercing the somber drapery of Mars, twinkled upon brass buttons and gold lace, which showed that he was clad in uniform.

Why was he there alone and in irons?

Of what crime had he been guilty to be left there in that dread spot, leagues away from human habitation?

In such silence he remained that one might believe he were dead; but ever and anon he would move his head from side to side in a vain endeavor to pierce the gloom.

The sounds that reached his ears were the chirp of swamp insects, the croaks of frogs, and the occasional splash of an alligator in the water, with the shriek of a wild fowl, suddenly startled to wing by some monster of the deep.

The dismal hoot of an owl, calling to his melancholy mate, would vary the monotony of sound now and then, and add to the gloom and horror of his situation.

But, most of all was what he saw in the somber light, and his sense of hearing was deadened with the energy he threw into his sense of sight.

There on the waters of the lagoon, and swimming slowly toward him, was a huge dark object, which he knew but too well was an alligator searching for prey.

Bound as he was, how easily he would fall a victim to the horrid monster.

Nearer and nearer came the hideous saurian, until his head protruded over the bank and his ungainly feet clutched for a hold.

Up the slight bank the slimy lizard scrambled and then paused to look around him.

He had scented game, and now he must find it.

A moment more and he had sighted his prey, and he gave a low snort of delight, opened his huge mouth with its long, glittering rows of teeth, struck the ground viciously with his heavy tail, and moved slowly toward his intended victim.

Then the bound man felt the full horror of his situation.

His wrists were in bracelets of iron, and stout ropes held him from feet to neck to the tree.

To break these bonds was beyond the power of man, and yet in agony he writhed as though to make the attempt.

Then from his lips came a gurgling, groaning sound, yet no cry, and the reason was that he was gagged.

And yet what good would a cry for help have done him in that lone spot?

Still, could he but cry out and give vent to his despair and anguish, it seemed to him that he would feel better able to meet the terrible fate that threatened him.

Nearer and nearer now the huge lagoon monster had come, until his fiercely-armed jaws seemed about to grasp their game and tear him away from the tree in spite of his bonds.

Then, when all hope was gone, and despair seized upon the heart and soul of the man, kind nature came to his relief and he fainted.

CHAPTER II.

THE LAGOON SPY.

IN the same dark lagoon, on the banks of which a man stood bound to a tree, facing an awful death, a canoe was gliding swiftly along over the deep and sluggish waters half an hour prior to the scene related in the last chapter.

The canoe seemed as light as a feather, and was sent along at a noiseless, rapid pace, by the use of a paddle, held in the hands of its only occupant.

The course of the little craft lay toward the inlet, into which the lagoon flowed, and although the waves caused it to dance about when it emerged upon the waters of the basin, the willful paddler still held on his way.

But suddenly he sent his paddle sharp down, and the act slackened his further advance, while he peered into the darkness ahead.

Now, as the starlight fell upon him, it could be seen that he had a bronzed face, the hue of an Indian's, and was dressed in the fanciful costume of a Mexican, even to the sombrero, which did not hide a mass of black hair that fell down his back to his waist.

As he looked ahead of him his eyes fell upon a vessel in the offing, and just off the entrance to the inlet. It had luffed up, and his keen sight detected a boat coming shoreward.

It was heading directly into the inlet, and so he put his light canoe about and sought the cover of the sheltering trees along the lagoon bank.

Slowly across the inlet came the boat, and watching it intently, he beheld three persons were in it.

One sat in the stern, his hands resting upon the tiller, and there were two oarsmen.

That the lagoon was the destination of the boat was evident, and the spy kept his place under the overhanging branches and watched.

Suddenly he started, for one of the oarsmen in the boat arose, seized the helmsman, and a pistol was thrust into his face, with the low but distinctly spoken words, which reached the ears of the spy:

"Captain Pierre Dupont, the Sea Marauder, you are my prisoner!"

The spy dropped his paddle into the water, as if to dash forth from his hiding place directly upon the boat; but a second thought seemed to check this design, and he remained where he was, listening and waiting.

A few words passed between those in the boat, which did not reach his ears, and then he saw the helmsman ironed securely, and the boat pulled on up the lagoon.

Slowly, beneath the overhanging branches, the spy followed, until his further advance was checked by a tree fallen into the stream, and he dared not round it for fear he would be seen, at least until the boat was some distance away.

But suddenly he saw the boat head inshore and make a landing. The sounds told him that some of its occupants were landing, and he waited.

Presently he saw the boat returning down the stream, and in it was but one occupant.

He determined to follow it, and did so, until he saw its course lay directly back to the vessel in the offing.

Then he put about once more, paddled back to the fallen tree and landed.

Cautiously he crept toward the spot where the boat had landed, and, as he drew near, he heard a strange sound.

It seemed to come from a human throat, and yet, if so, the one who uttered these sounds must be dying.

Instantly he sprung forward, and a scene met his gaze that seemed to freeze his heart, for he halted suddenly and stood like a statue.

But only for an instant he stood thus, while his eyes fell upon the fearful scene of a man bound to a tree and in front of him a huge alligator preparing to tear him away.

As he looked, the man's head drooped upon his breast, and the moaning, groaning sounds he had heard ceased.

Then the spy drew from his sash a long blade and darted forward.

The monster saw him and opened wide its cavernous jaws to greet him; but with a nerve and agility that were remarkable, the spy sprung toward him, thrust forward his hand, and when the snap came, as the alligator closed his capacious mouth, it held between them the knife, which was driven deep into the brain, and the monstrous reptile's life had ended.

The spy heeded not the slain alligator, but quickly turned to the bound man.

As he faced him he started, and then raised his hand and gazed into his face, while he cried, in Spanish:

"Yes, it is the Sea Marauder, but his hair is as white as snow, turned so in his few moments of horror.

"I will save him."

Drawing from his breast-pocket a knife, he quickly severed the ropes that bound him to the tree, and, raising him in his strong arms, strode rapidly back to the canoe.

Placing him in the bottom of it at full length he seized his paddle and went flying across the lagoon.

Once under the shelter of the other bank and he headed up the stream, and sheltered by the foliage kept on at a rapid, untiring stroke, as though anxious to place distance between himself and some threatening danger.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT TWO VILLAINS BEHELD.

SEVERAL days after the incidents just related two persons stood on the banks of the Mississippi River, just below the city of New Orleans, which was in full view of them.

Their bronzed faces and dress indicated that they were Indians, and at their feet was a light canoe, fastened to the root of a tree beneath which they were standing, and which also sheltered a small tent, or wigwam, which showed that the spot was their camp.

One of the two was a man, tall, well-formed, and showing no signs of the age that his snow-white hair indicated.

The other's dress would prove her to be a woman, and her clear-cut features and large black eyes were almost handsome, while she was much younger than her companion.

The eyes of the two were directed down the river, as though watching for the coming of a

vessel, and that such was really the case their words indicated, for the man said, and speaking in Spanish:

"Not in sight yet, Peon."

"No, but they will come," replied the other.

"They should be due here now, for it is three days since we left the lagoon."

"Yes, but they will come," was again the firm reply.

"Well, Peon, when they do, they will soon find out that I am not dead, thanks to you, my noble friend."

"I am glad, senor, to have saved you, for I have not forgotten that night in Mexico when my own people would have put me to death and you saved me, dressed my wounds, and took me on board of your vessel."

"You have more than repaid the debt, Peon, for from what did you not save me?"

"Ugh! my flesh creeps and heart ceases to beat at the thought of that fearful night, and does not this white hair tell how I suffered?" and he passed his hand through his snow-white locks.

"Yes; and who would not have suffered, senor? But the white hair aids your disguise now, and no one would believe you to be other than an old Indian chief."

"Ha! ha! ha! Peon, and you make up well as a squaw, for your good features, slender form, and not very great height, aid well the deception; but once let any one feel the grip of your iron arm and they will know different."

"But we are both well disguised, and under our new colors we can work, and have bitter, hateful work to do, Peon," and the man spoke with savage earnestness.

"You have revenge to seek, senor," was the low reply.

"Ay, and a fortune to gain, for the capture of my schooner, my beautiful Sea Marauder, has left me poor, excepting the few thousands in jewels I always carry with me."

"And to think, too, that that Condemned Midshipman, Merle Monte of the Gold Ship, also captured Brandt the Buccaneer again, and this time I warrant you, he'll never escape."

"Captain Monte is a great sailor, senor, even if he be but a boy in years."

"He is indeed, and now that he has captured Eduardo the Mexican pirate, Brandt the Buccaneer, and my vessel, if not myself, his Government will pardon him and he will be free to spend his treasure, which he has carried about with him and protected so well."

"I tell you, Peon, if I could only capture his Gold Schooner, after she arrives in port, I would be a made man and give up piracy, for he has untold treasure on board of her, and she can outsail the Sea Marauder in any wind, is better armed, equipped, and stands up like a line-of-battle-ship in the stiffest blow."

"It might be done, senor, for they will not be so particular now to guard the vessels, as there is to-day no pirate chief afloat."

"True, and when the vessels come in, for you say that it was Merle Monte's intention to bring them here, after he had captured me, I will see what can be done."

"The Mexican cutter of Pirate Eduardo is here, and also the brig which Brandt the Buc-

caner turned into a freebooter craft, and these, with the Gold Ship and my schooner, will give us plenty to select from, and all good, only the Gold Craft is the best of all, and has the treasure besides."

"But the crew, senor?"

"Oh! I can get a crew through Giro, though he did deceive me in making me take Brandt the Buccaneer as my lieutenant, under the name of Brentano, when he knew who he was, and that he had but just escaped from the Sea Wolf; but I tell you, Peon, Brandt was not the man to play second to any one, and he would have soon ended my life in some way and taken command himself."

"Yes, senor—but see! There comes the Gold Ship!"

The pretended woman pointed down the river to where a schooner had just shot around a bend running under full sail, and making eight knots out of the six-knot breeze blowing.

"And my beautiful schooner too, Peon!" almost shouted the other, as in the wake of the first vessel another schooner was seen to come in view.

"The lugger will soon follow, senor, for they have but just crowded on sail to run up to the city at a lively pace. See! there is the lugger!"

As Peon spoke, a large lugger came into full view also crowded with sail, and a cable's length astern of the last schooner.

As they stood over toward the other shore on the port tack, they each one went about and pointed directly for the tree, beneath which the two pretended Indians stood, as they came on on the starboard tack; and then from the lips of both the watchers broke a cry in chorus, for their eyes fell upon a sight which sent a thrill of horror through them.

There, suspended in the rigging of the schooner in advance, was the form of a man enveloped in a black flag, the white skull and cross-bones being upon his heart.

He swung about at the end of a rope, and as his face turned toward the two watchers, when the schooner was near, one of them recognized the one who had thus died in ignominy, for he cried out in hoarse tones:

"Good God! It is Brandt the Buccaneer! At last he has met his fate!"

CHAPTER IV.

TYING THE THREADS TOGETHER.

THE two plotters stood upon the river-bank, closely watching the coming vessels.

The Gold Ship, which though so called was really a schooner, was almost up to them when the second craft, the Sea Marauder, was in the middle of the river, and the lugger just going about away over upon the opposite shore.

All were good sailors, but the leading vessel was creeping away from the second one as fast as was that craft dropping the lugger.

It was, however, upon the leading schooner that the eyes of the two men were centered, for though with paint-browed face and Indian costume, one of these two was Captain Pierre Dupont the pirate chief, who, with his vessel, was also known as the Sea Marauder.

He had once been a man of honor, the son of a Mississippi planter; but, going to the bad, he had lost the maiden he loved by his evil life, been driven to outlawry, and made himself famous as the leader of a band of river freebooters known as the Marauders of the Mississippi.

Attempting to kidnap the maiden that had cast him off, he had been thwarted by the very man who had exposed his evil acts in the first place and, as was then supposed, was killed by him.

But he had escaped, when he saw that his rival, Basil Branch, was winning the fight, and for long years had not been heard of; but he was devoting his life to piracy, and at last became captain of a schooner, which he armed and manned, and then determined to seek revenge.

Annabel Tracey, the maiden he had loved, had married his foe, Basil Branch, and they were living a secluded life at the plantation of the husband, which was situated upon the Mississippi River and known as The Retreat.

Basil Branch, too, had taken to an evil life, for he had become a reckless gambler; and year by year his fortune and his wife's went from him, until The Retreat plantation alone remained and it was heavily mortgaged.

To redeem his fortunes, Basil Branch had engaged in smuggling between Vera Cruz, Havana and New Orleans, and in this way had met Brandt, the Buccaneer, who had urged him to aid him in the seizure of a Galveston packet, the Montezuma, a fast sailing brig.

This Basil Branch did, hoping by a short piratical career to be able to get enough gold to redeem his estate from debt, for the object of the cruise of the Huntress, for so Brandt, the Buccaneer, named his vessel, was to chase down the Gold Ship, upon which Merle Monte had stored a treasure he had inherited, and which had been long hidden away upon an island on the Mexican Coast.

The Gold Ship had been cruising about without a haven or a flag, for Merle Monte, her owner and commander, had been condemned to death by his Government, when, as a midshipman in the United States Navy, he had mutinied, it was said by his envious foes and brother officers, though he had simply defended his own life, and that of his faithful slave, Mezrak, when attacked by seamen at the orders of a superior who hated him.

From his sentence, death at the yard-arm, Merle Monte had escaped, through the aid of Brandt, the Buccaneer, who tried to force from him the secret of where lay the island upon which his treasure was buried; but this secret the pirate could not force from him, or from Mezrak, and rescued by Little Belt, a supposed cabin boy, but in reality a woman, seeking revenge against Brandt, the Buccaneer, Merle Monte secured a vessel, and with a good crew, set sail to protect his treasure from those who hunted him down for it.

It was at this time that the Sea Marauder, Captain Pierre, as he was generally known, sought to avenge himself upon Basil Branch, by getting into his power his wife and daughter, the latter a beautiful girl of fifteen.

Knowing that Basil Branch had sailed as lieutenant to Brandt, the Buccaneer, though he had given out that he was going to Galveston on business, Captain Pierre went to The Retreat plantation, and told Mrs. Branch and Pearl that the husband and father had sent him to take them to Galveston to join him.

Eighteen years had changed the pirate so much, that with a full-grown beard prevented Mrs. Branch from recognizing her old lover, and believing no wrong, she and Pearl had intrusted themselves to his care, and taken passage on a Galveston packet to, as she believed, join her husband.

But the vessel of Captain Pierre, the Sea Marauder, lying in wait for the packet schooner, gave it chase when the Gulf was reached, and only a fearful storm prevented its capture; but misfortune fell upon the craft, for from carrying so heavy a pressure of canvas to escape the pirate, it was dismantled and became a wreck.

The boats were lowered, and all on board got into them, excepting the schooner's captain, Mrs. Branch, and her supposed escort, Captain Pierre, and these were left upon the wreck, for the boat in which they intended going, was broken away by a wave, and the crew would not return to the wreck for them, fearing it would go down.

Thus were Pearl and her mother separated, and the boat in which was the maiden, was picked up by the captured brig, under Brandt, the Buccaneer and Basil Branch was brought face to face with his daughter.

But he pretended he was a prisoner on board, held for ransom by the chief, and Brandt, wishing to send to New Orleans for supplies, ammunition and more men, ran for the Delta, and put Basil Branch and Pearl upon a coasting-smack, in which to go to the city of New Orleans, for believing his wife lost, the pirate planter was anxious to place his daughter in a convent until his own affairs could be satisfactorily settled.

In the mean time the Gold Ship had sighted the wreck and taken poor Mrs. Branch, the captain and Pierre Dupont, and they having seen the brig of Brandt pick up the boat in which had been Pearl, and knowing into whose power she had fallen, Merle Monte at once set out to cruise for the buccaneer chief, and learning that a suspicious vessel was anchored in an inlet on the coast, ran there.

Pierre knew but too well that it was his schooner, and while the Gold Ship was awaiting the coming of day to run in and attack her, he slipped overboard, swam the league to where she lay, boarded her to the amazement of his officers and crew, and at once towed out with muffled oars in the darkness and escaped.

Shortly after, he overhauled the very smack upon which was Basil Branch and his daughter, and ordered his lieutenant to make them prisoners, while he remained unseen, and, in the character of a ransomed captive, he went on up to the city in the little craft, while his own vessel headed for a secret rendezvous upon the coast to await his return.

The object of Captain Pierre in going to New Orleans was to enlarge his crew, and get a few heavier guns, that the Sea Marauder might

prove a match for the Gold Ship, which he was determined to capture.

But while there the United States cruiser came into port, having as prizes the brig of Brandt, the Buccaneer, and a Mexican pirate cutter, both of which Captain Mayo Meredith, of the vessel-of-war, reported had been turned over to him by the Condemned Midshipman of the Gold Ship.

Also on the Sea Wolf, in irons, was the famous pirate, Brandt, the Buccaneer, and anxious to get off, Captain Pierre set sail in his lugger, which he had purchased for the purpose, and which carried in its hold his guns, ammunition, and two-score good seamen, but wicked men.

He had arrived off the rendezvous where lay hidden his vessel, and went on shore with two of his seamen in a small boat, to be suddenly seized by them, and to his horror discover that one was Merle Monte, and the other Little Belt, in disguise, who had shipped upon his lugger to betray him.

And more, while Merle Monte, after tying him to the tree for safe keeping, ran on by the shore of the lagoon to his vessel to give the alarm, Little Belt had gone back to the lugger to report all safe and lead it into the trap.

From his desperate peril, Peon, his Mexican seaman and spy, had rescued him, and made known that the Gold Ship had captured the Sea Marauder, and released his prisoners, and was then lying in the Lost Pond, the secret retreat, waiting to catch the lugger in the trap laid for it.

By way of the lagoons and bayous, which are like a net-work below New Orleans, Captain Pierre and his faithful Indian companion went up to the city, disguised themselves as the reader has seen, and awaited the coming of their own vessels, the Sea Marauder and lugger, as prizes to the Gold Ship.

It was no wonder then that they gazed upon the coveted Gold Ship and their own beautiful schooner, with overpowering emotions, for Captain Pierre saw all his work to do over.

"But better begin again than end like Brandt yonder," he muttered, as the Gold Ship went about for the port tack, within easy pistol-shot of where he stood with Peon, and so near that the face of Brandt, the Buccaneer, could be distinctly seen.

Waiting until the lugger had also put in close and gone off flying on the port tack, Captain Pierre and Peon, confident in their disguises, got into the canoe tied to the tree, and paddled up toward the anchorage above.

CHAPTER V.

THE EXECUTION ON THE GOLD SHIP.

I WILL now ask the reader to accompany me on board the Gold Ship, prior to her appearing in sight, around the bend of the Mississippi, when she came in view of Captain Pierre and Peon.

The vessel was one of uncommon beauty, from keel to truck, and that perfect discipline was kept on board, a glance was sufficient to prove.

Every rope was coiled and in its place, the sails not spread were furled neatly, the decks

were as clean as a dining-table, the brass guns shone like polished gold, and the iron pivot pieces of heavier caliber looked like ebony.

The crew were mostly attired in a jaunty uniform, and, as for the model of the vessel, it was perfect.

Rushing along as it did through the muddy waters of the river, it seemed like a gaunt greyhound after prey.

The hull was long, narrow, went deep in the water, and her masts raked far back and towered high in air, giving her space to spread a vast amount of canvas.

Upon the quarter-deck stood a group near the two helmsmen, whom I must introduce to my reader.

One was Merle Monte, the ruling spirit of the vessel, calling himself *Midshipman* Monte though his officers and crew gave him the title of captain.

A youth with a face that would have been called beautiful in a woman, there was yet about it a look of perfect manliness.

He was attired in a handsome uniform, and paced the deck to and fro, while the others present were conversing in low tones.

In the group that stood apart was a person who appeared to be a youth, to judge from the attire, but the slender, graceful form and lovely though touchingly sad, and yet at times stern face, was a woman.

Belle Denham once her name had been, but her love won by Brandt, the Buccaneer, who had cruelly deceived her as to his character, and then done her bitter wrongs, she had cast aside her feminine garb to track him to death, and had borne many *aliases*, but upon the Gold Ship she was known as Little Belt.

By her side, upon the right, stood a young girl of rare beauty of both face and form, though scarcely could she have been over fifteen; and this was Pearl, the daughter of Basil Branch, a dark, stern-faced man, who half-reclined in a chair near her, for he was suffering from a severe wound.

Upon the back of his chair affectionately leaned his wife, a handsome lady of thirty-six, though looking a little worn from all she had passed through.

Up to within a league of the city the Gold Schooner had been under shortened sail, not to run out of sight of the two prizes.

Upon the deck of the lugger stood a young man of twenty-five, perhaps, with a face bronzed by exposure, intelligent, resolute and fine-looking.

It was Vance Murell, formerly an officer of the United States Navy, whom cruel circumstances, over which he held no control, had driven to piracy, and he had been the lieutenant of Captain Pierre, and left in command of the Sea Marauder while his chief went to the city.

Basil Branch and Pearl had been left in his charge, and to him they owed the treatment they had received, and which had endeared him to both father and daughter, for at least he was a gentleman.

The truth was that the handsome pirate had loved Pearl from the first, and his noble conduct and a knowledge of his life had caused Merle Monte not to include him in the list of his pirate

prisoners, but to give him command of the lugger to take to the city.

Upon the quarter-deck of the Sea Marauder was Captain Trenor, the commander of the packet schooner, which had been wrecked in the storm, and upon which Captain Pierre and his two victims, Mrs. Branch and Pearl, had taken passage for Galveston, as the mother and daughter had supposed.

He was a fine specimen of the honest sailor, and had served as lieutenant to Merle Monte on the Gold Ship after having been picked up off the wreck of his own vessel.

As the three vessels approached the city, Merle signaled for the Sea Marauder and lugger to spread all sail, and to keep as close in his wake as they could.

Then before they reached him he luffed up and ordered sternly:

"Little Belt, bring the prisoner on deck!"

Little Belt disappeared down the companion-way and soon reappeared, followed by Mezrak, Merle Monte's Abyssinian slave, deformed in body, but with a heart all love for his master.

Mezrak was dressed in a rich Persian costume, for a slave once in the land of Persia, he had never discarded its dress.

By his side as he stepped on deck was a man heavily ironed, but of superb presence and magnificent physique.

It was Brandt the Buccaneer, one of the last of the Gulf Pirates, and a man whose life had been one long career of crime.

Many times had he escaped death, when it was believed that escape was impossible, and only a short time before Merle Monte had delivered him a prisoner on board the Sea Wolf, from which he had escaped by bribing his guard with gems worth a fortune.

His face was pale now, but firm and fearless, as he approached his captors, for Little Belt, his wronged wife, had been the one to bring him again to face death at the yard-arm.

Arriving on deck, Brandt the Buccaneer glanced quickly around him, while Merle Monte watched him with the eye of a hawk.

He saw first that the schooner was in the river, which he knew well enough to understand that New Orleans was but a league above where they then were.

Then he smiled grimly as his eyes fell upon Merle, and his glance upon Little Belt was full of fierce hate and resentment.

Then he glanced at his former lieutenant Basil Branch, whose wife and daughter little dreamed what he had been, and he seemed about to speak.

But he caught an appealing look in the eyes of the reformed pirate officer, and with a smile turned his gaze upon Mrs. Branch and Pearl, bending his head in courtly salute.

Wheeling suddenly, he looked back at the Sea Marauder and lugger, and said quietly:

"Well, Merle Monte, you have done well to capture yonder two prizes."

"I think more of my capture of you, sir, than all else," was the calm reply.

"Doubtless, for I have given you much trouble; but I am not hanged yet," was the cool reply.

"But shall be within five minutes."

"Ha! do you intend to hang me without a trial?" and the pirate chief's face grew a shade paler.

"A trial given you would be but mockery, and I am determined you shall never escape to again hoist your black flag, as you have done time and again."

"Satan rebuking sin," sneered the pirate.

"No, for though I wear the brand of mutineer and deserter upon me, I have done no wrong, and my vessel has not been a sea robber."

"But words are useless, for you shall die."

"Little Belt?" and Merle turned to the woman, who acted as his lieutenant.

"Ay, ay, sir," was the quick reply.

"Your rope is ready, is it?"

"It is, sir; I have arranged it, as you see, sir, in the rigging, so that the prisoner can be drawn up from amidships."

"And you desire to execute the pirate?"

"I do, was the almost savage response."

"Then the prisoner is in your hands, Little Belt, for you to execute the sentence of death upon him, by hanging him in the rigging of this vessel, and there leave him until one hour after we shall have dropped anchor before the city of New Orleans."

These words of sentence Merle spoke in loud, ringing tones, so that they were heard, not only by all on the Gold Schooner, but by the crews of the Sea Marauder and lugger, which vessels had approached near and were just holding their own against the stream, as their commanders temporarily checked their speed.

Then turning to Brandt the Buccaneer, Merle Monte continued:

"You, Sir Pirate, have heard your sentence, and may Heaven have mercy on you."

Brandt glanced full in the face of the midshipman, and saw that he was in deadly earnest, and that it was not his intention to deliver him over to the Sea Wolf again, as he had hoped, and that his death was assured.

"I demand at least a week's respite," he said, sternly, hoping to gain time.

"Not a minute, sir."

"Would you send my soul on its flight unprepared to die?"

"You have so lived and faced death, and so you shall die."

"Basil Branch, to you I appeal, for, from the way matters look, you have some influence here," and Brandt turned to his wounded ex-officer.

Basil Branch flushed crimson at the appeal, and then became very pale, for he dreaded the secret of his deeds must come out; but he said, in a low tone:

"I can do nothing for you, Brandt."

"Then, by Heaven, I'll strike you a blow that shall—"

"Up with him, Little Belt, and lose no time," shouted Merle, who saw that it was the pirate's intention to expose his lieutenant before his wife and daughter.

Startled by his words, Little Belt seized the rope, threw the noose over the head of the pirate, while Mezrak sprang forward and tied him securely, and instantly the woman sternly cried:

"Now, Brandt Brentford, I am avenged at last!"

"Curse you, woman, with my dying breath, and you, Basil Branch, shall not—"

"Up with him, men!" almost shrieked Little Belt, to whose side Merle Monte had sprung, and said something in a low tone, determined that he should not betray Basil Branch.

Bound as he was, hand and foot, and with his pirate flag wrapped around him by Mezrak, Brandt, the Buccaneer, had a bitter curse strangled upon his lips by the noose, and was instantly dragged high in air by the half-dozen seamen who had hold of the other end of the rope.

In horror Mrs. Branch and Pearl had turned away, and buried their faces in their hands, while Merle cried, in clarion tones:

"All hands ahoy, to get the schooner under way once more!"

The men sprung to their posts, the schooner fell off from the wind, and once more began to shoot ahead, while above her decks were spread cloud after cloud of snowy duck, until she dashed into full sight of the city, a beautiful, yet terrible sight, with that dead form swinging in her rigging.

CHAPTER VI.

MERLE MONTE'S TRIUMPH.

THE young hero of the Gold Ship sat alone in his cabin, brooding over the past.

His surroundings were luxurious in the extreme, for the cabin was furnished with every comfort, and Merle Monte reclined upon a velvet divan, his eyes fixed upon vacancy, and his thoughts dwelling upon something that seemed to wholly enwrap him.

"Captain Mayo Meredith, of the Sea Wolf, to see you, sir," said an officer, entering.

It was Vance Murell, the young lieutenant of the Sea Marauder, who had abjured piracy forever.

"Admit him at once, Mr. Murell," was the response, and shaking off the reverie upon him, Merle Monte sprung to his feet to receive his distinguished visitor.

It was the day after the arrival of the Gold Schooner in port, with her two prizes, and the form of Brandt, the Buccaneer, seen swinging in the rigging, and the whole city was yet in a state of uproar at the joyful occurrence.

The next instant Vance Murell entered, accompanied by Captain Meredith.

"Captain Meredith, I am delighted to welcome you, sir; permit me to present to you my lieutenant, Mr. Murell, of whom I spoke to you yesterday."

Captain Meredith grasped the hand of the lieutenant and ex-pirate, and said earnestly:

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Murell, and feel that, from all Monte tells me, that you will sink the past forever, and once more become a man of honor."

"I will, sir; and to you and Captain Monte I owe it, that I was not hanged with Brandt, as I richly deserved for becoming an outlaw," and not wishing to trust himself further, for his voice was quivering with emotion, Vance Murell left the cabin hurriedly.

"He seems a noble fellow at heart, Merle,"

said Captain Meredith, as the officer disappeared.

"He is, and it was because he killed those who had wronged and robbed him, that he was forced to fly, for, although he fought them in a fair duel, one of them, out of revenge, ere he died, proclaimed him a murderer, and he was forced to fly to save his life.

"Captured by the Sea Marauder, he drifted into an officer's position on board, and I am glad that you so kindly included him in the pardon of myself and crew."

"My dear boy, here is the Government's pardon, sent me for you, for your gallant capture of Brandt, when last you took him, his vessel and crew; and the craft of Captain Eduardo, the Mexican pirate.

"Now I know, when the Government learns that you have recaptured Brandt, after his escape from my vessel, and also a lugger with arms and men which he had sailed with, not to speak of the schooner Sea Marauder, your triumph will be complete; but what do you think about this Captain Pierre?"

"As I told you, sir, he disappeared most mysteriously from where I left him, bound to a tree.

"A huge alligator was found dead near him, and at first it looked as though he might have been torn away by the monsters, and dragged into the lagoon and devoured.

"But finding out, through Mr. Murell, that a Peon Indian of Mexico, a seaman on the Sea Marauder, who was given his pardon, had also disappeared, closer search was made, and the knife of the Mexican was found in the mouth of the alligator, and it was evident that the ropes holding Pierre were cut, not broken.

"This proved that he escaped."

"Then he is harmless, for he has no vessel or crew, or gold to help him get a craft, as you say his fortune was on the Sea Marauder?"

"Yes, Captain Meredith; but he is a dangerous man, and I shall expect to see him afloat again before long."

"Then, Merle, you will have to run him down in your Gold Ship, which you say you intend to keep."

"Yes, sir, I shall retain my schooner as a yacht, at least for the present."

"But remember, I bring you to-day your commission as a lieutenant in the navy, for gallant services, and here it is with your pardon, for yourself and crew, for sailing without a flag.

"Your so-called mutiny, which I have fully investigated, I found to be caused by a plot, formed by several envious officers on the Sea Wolf to get rid of you, and so I reported to Government, and the result is your honorable restoration to the service, and promotion, and the prompt dismissal of Lieutenant Dunning Graham and Midshipman Paul Martin."

"I am sorry for them, sir; but they brought it upon themselves."

"You have a noble heart, Merle Monte, and will be an ornament to the service, and I predict, go up another step of the ladder of promotion when the Government learns of your late heroic acts."

"No, Captain Meredith, for I have here awaiting you my resignation."

"Your resignation!" exclaimed the officer astounded.

"Yes, sir; my resignation from the navy."

"You do not mean this, Merle?"

"I do, sir."

"Think!"

"I have thought, sir."

"But let me persuade you."

"No, Captain Meredith, I am resolved upon my course."

"You gave me a berth in the navy, for services I rendered you when I was a mere boy on the Mexican Coast, where I dwelt upon my Treasure Island with my faithful slave Mezrak."

"Successful, I won the envy of some of my brother officers, and the result was a plot to ruin me, which well-nigh succeeded."

"Unjustly I was condemned, and I barely escaped death at the yard-arm, along with poor Mezrak."

"But now my acts have been condoned, my pardon has followed, promotion has followed my pardon, and feeling that I have triumphed I now resign from the navy."

"But what will you do, Merle?"

"Oh, sir, I have vast riches; I love the city of New Orleans, where my father and mother lived before me, and I shall buy me a home there and live to enjoy my riches."

"Ah, Merle, I had counted upon you as one of my lieutenants."

"I am sorry, sir, but I am determined upon my course."

"Yet, should there be a war between the United States and any foreign power, most gladly will I again enter the service, and arm, man and equip my own vessel to serve my country."

In vain was it that Captain Meredith urged Merle to reconsider his determination.

He remained firm, and his resignation went on to the Government, with a request that his share of the prizes he had captured be divided among the officers and crew of the Sea Wolf, and, as the captures included Brandt's brig Huntress, the Mexican cutter Gold Hunter, the Sea Marauder and the lugger, with their armaments, the sum was by no means inconsiderable that Merle turned over to be given to his old shipmates of the cruise, upon which he had known so much of pleasure and of pain.

CHAPTER VII.

MEZRAK MAKES A PURCHASE.

HARDLY had the excitement over his magnificent achievements quieted down when Merle Monte became again an object of universal admiration and observation, for he had purchased a grand mansion above the city, which had been built by a millionaire, who had been unable to keep up the place even with his fortune, and found it, as he had believed, unsalable property upon his hands.

The mansion was extensive, built in the grandest style of that period, and was looked upon as an ornament to the country.

Acres of flower gardens, lawns and parks surrounded it, and altogether it was a palace fit for a king.

A few days after his arrival in New Orleans Merle had commissioned Mezrak to find him a

home and purchase it, and the above mansion house was the selection of the faithful black.

He had asked to see the owner, and that gentleman, feeling rather blue over having spent a fortune on a home he was unable to keep up, granted him an audience, believing he was a messenger from some friend in the city.

He was rather astounded at beholding Mezrak, with his Persian costume, short legs, long body, huge head and remarkably lengthy arms, and said quickly:

"Well, my man, what is your business with me?"

"Is this Monsieur Luzette?" asked Mezrak, in a courtly way, removing his turban.

"Yes, I am Monsieur Luzette."

"Will you kindly tell me the cost of your home here, monsieur?" was the surprising question.

"Well, as to that I do not know how you, a slave, can be interested in that subject; but I'll tell you that it cost me so much that there is not enough of my fortune left to keep it up as it should be."

"Thank you, monsieur. Then you will sell it?"

"I will."

"Will you be good enough to name your price, monsieur?"

Monsieur Luzette at this laughed right out, for the idea was ridiculous to him, and he began to believe that the black was crazy, for he had never seen either Merle or his slave. But he answered:

"Yes, I will name my price, and if you will find me a purchaser I will buy you your freedom."

"I thank monsieur, but I do not care for my freedom," was the cold reply.

"Ah! then you have a good master, doubtless; but, my man, as you ask me my price for my home, which you can see is really a palace, I will tell you that it cost me just four hundred thousand dollars."

"Ah! I expected that it had cost more; but as monsieur should make a profit to repay him for his outlay and trouble I will give him just half a million dollars for it."

"You will do what?"

"I will give monsieur just half a million dollars cash for his home."

"The devil!"

Monsieur was not a profane man, but he could not resist, on this startling occasion, using the name of his Satanic Majesty as an exclamation.

"Does monsieur accept?" quietly asked Mezrak.

Monsieur Luzette was astounded, and still believing that Mezrak was insane, he answered:

"Of course I accept when I can make a clear hundred thousand on a property I expected to lose half my outlay upon."

"Then will monsieur send for his lawyer to draw up the papers, while he counts over these notes to see that it is the sum I offer?"

As Mezrak spoke he drew from the folds of his scarf several packages of bank notes containing bills of the largest denominations, and placed them in the hands of the amazed owner of the house.

Monsieur Luzette looked at the notes, saw that they were genuine, and from their number, and the amounts engraved upon their face, that they must aggregate the half million dollars.

With them in his hands there could be no mistake about the earnestness of the black; but where could he have become possessed of such a sum?

"Do you mean it?" he gasped.

"Has not monsieur the amount to prove that I do?"

"True. And you wish to buy the place as it stands?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Who are you?"

"Mezrak, the Abyssinian slave of the Senor Merle Monte," was the calm response.

"Ah! the young hero of those pirate captures?"

"The same, monsieur."

"I remember it was said that he was enormously rich."

"He is, monsieur."

"Worth several millions, I have heard."

"Many, very many millions, monsieur."

"And he sent you to buy my place?"

"He ordered me to purchase for him a suitable house, and your mansion is my choice, monsieur."

"But will he permit you to spend a sum so vast?"

"He gave me no limit, as my possessing that sum of money proves, monsieur."

"In fact, I expected you to set a larger price upon your beautiful house than you have, monsieur."

"And had I done so?"

"I should have purchased it monsieur."

"Then, I wish I had done so; but the place is yours for your young master, and I will at once send my carriage for my attorney and have the deeds drawn up."

And this costly purchase it was of Mezrak, for Merle Monte, that set the city agog again about the young hero, for Monsieur Luzette moved out bag and baggage, and Merle moved in, while his yacht, the one time Gold Schooner, but renamed the Dragon, ran up and anchored off the shore, in front of Monte Manor, as the elegant house had been re-christened.

If Monsieur Luzette had had to cut down his expenses to live in his house after it was built, Merle at once showed that his purse was a deeper one than the builder's, for Mezrak purchased for him a large number of slaves, whom he attired in costly velvet liveries, and gold was most lavishly spent upon every luxury that could add to the palatial home of the favored youth.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MONEY-LENDER.

AFTER the return of Basil Branch and his family they went to a hotel in the city, and, as soon as he was sufficiently recovered from his wound to go out, Mr. Branch hastened to his agents regarding his estate.

He knew that the mortgage had been due for some little time, on the plantation known as The Retreat, and he feared that he might lose it.

To pay this mortgage, and save his wife and daughter from beggary, had really been the motive which prompted the planter to throw his last card, which was to turn to piracy.

When he had left Brandt, the Buccaneer, at the time that his daughter and himself had been put upon the coaster, Basil Branch had received from the chief a few precious stones of value, which, when sold, would bring sufficient gold to liquidate a few of his pressing debts and gain time on the others, which he wished to do.

These gems he still had, and from his hotel, before going to his agent he hastened with them to a Jew money-lender.

"Is Mr. Isaac Jacobs in?" he asked the youth in charge of the shop.

"He ish," was the reply of the youth, and he at once summoned the one who answered to the name printed in gilt letters over the door.

"Ah! it ish mine fri'nt, Mishter B'anch. I ish so glad!" said Isaac Jacobs, smiling a welcome.

"Doubtless you are, Jacobs, as I never come but that you make a few hundred per cent. on all our business transactions," was the blunt response.

"Ah! no, mine fri'nt, I makes but a leetle interest."

"But I vash hear dot you ish pe a priz'ner to Brandt, t'e Puccaneer?"

"Yes; he seized the brig upon which I took passage to Galveston; but I am back again safe, and I want some money."

"Yesh, you ish always wants money, Mishter B'anch. But what has you for de security dish time?"

"Here are several precious stones of value, and I want on them every dollar you can let me have."

As Basil Branch spoke he laid down upon the desk a diamond and several rubies, emeralds and pearls.

"Ah! I see; dey ish family gems," said the Jew.

"Yes; but what are they worth?"

"It ish not vat dey ish vort', Mishter B'anch, but vot dey vill pring."

"Ah, yes! Well, what will you give me for them?"

"One diamont ish value at t'ree t'ousant, t'e two emeralds at fifteen hundred each, t'e t'ree rubies altogether one t'ousant, an' t'e t'ree pearls apout five hundred. Well, six t'ousant tollars, mine fri'nt."

"And they are worth just three times that sum."

"I shall go elsewhere."

"Holt on, Mister B'anch, ant let me see t'em again."

"Yesh, t'ey ish petter ash I t'ort 'em to pe, ant ash you hash peen goot customer o' mine, I vill give you ten t'ousant."

"No, sir; I must have fifteen thousand."

"Vell, I vill make it twelve."

"There is no need of dickering, Jacobs, for I will have the amount I need from you or go elsewhere."

"You have made fifty per cent. clear out of all you have loaned me money on in the past, and I will have every dollar I can get on these,"

"Vell, I vill give you the fifteen t'ousant tol-lars, put I vill lose monish on t'em."

"Bah! you will clear a thousand at any rate, and you know it."

"Take the gems and give me the money."

"Goolt?"

"No, I want bank-notes."

"Vell, here ish t'e monish," and the Jew counted out the money, which Basil Branch hastily thrust into his pocket and then departed.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TEMPTATION.

FROM the shop of Isaac Jacobs, the Jew money-lender, Basil Branch wended his way to the office of his agent.

Now this agent was a man who could drive a good bargain for his own interest, and had fattened his purse off of his transactions with Basil Branch, for he it was who had sold the planter's slaves, as he needed the money to pay his gambling debts, and had loaned money upon his landed property at a large interest, and at the same time allowing just enough on a mortgage to secure him double the amount should the property have to be sold.

He was a man of forty, a bachelor, with gold for his first, last and only love.

He was in his dingy office when Basil Branch called, and arose as he saw the planter.

"Ah! my dear Mr. Branch, I am glad to see you back for I feared you would be slain by that horrible pirate, in whose clutches I heard you had fallen, for your name was published among the passengers on the ill-fated brig," and the man bowed obsequiously.

"Thank you, Mr. Mordecai; but I liked not to have gotten back, for I was severely wounded, and am yet very weak, so you will excuse me if I take your easy-chair."

"Certainly, sir, and now tell me all about your adventures."

"They can be told in a word, Mordecai, for I was captured, wounded, and here I am."

"Now tell me the amount of interest due on those mortgages, on The Retreat Plantation and I will settle them to date."

"It is somewhat near twelve thousand I guess."

"Mr. Branch, I am sorry to tell you that I had to let your place go."

"Let it go, sir!" and Basil Branch sprung to his feet, his face white and form trembling.

"Yes, sir."

"I do not understand you, Henry Mordecai."

"I can make it explicit, sir."

"Do so, and at once, please."

"You are aware I believe, that it has been over two years since you paid any interest, which has accumulated largely, counting the interest on interest due."

"I am aware of that."

"I advised you to let me sell several more of your slaves to make a payment with."

"True, and I refused, for I had but half a dozen home servants left, of all my hundreds," said the planter bitterly.

"You gamble, Mr. Branch, and—"

"That is none of your business, sir, so tell me what you have to say and lose no time," was the stern response.

"Well, sir, I had held the parties off as long as I could, and when it was reported that you had been killed—"

"Killed?"

"It was so reported at first, sir."

"Go on!"

"I say when it was thus reported regarding your death, the parties came down for their money, and I did not know what to do, but put them off for a few days longer," and Henry Mordecai told the lie without a flush in his pallid face, for he alone held the mortgage, having only used other parties as tools in the transaction for purposes of his own.

"Well, sir, they wanted the money or the property, and that ends it?"

"No, Mr. Branch, for, during the few days I got them to wait, I received a visit from a gentleman who wished to purchase the estate."

"Ha! who is he?"

"A gentleman I did not know, sir, but who gave his name as Smith."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir; not an uncommon name."

"Well, sir, he asked me the price of the place, and said he wished to buy it, and all the servants attached to it."

"I told him the slaves had been purchased, a few at a time, by the Henderson brothers of the Bend Plantation, and he asked me to buy them back at a fair premium, as he wished to have all the negroes that had belonged to The Retreat, for then they worked more harmoniously together."

"And he bought the plantation?"

"He did, sir!"

"And the slaves?"

"I bought them back, sir, at an advance of fifty dollars on each one you sold the Hendersons."

"And what gave he for The Retreat, Mr. Mordecai?"

"Ah, Mr. Branch, there is where I have a little good news for you."

"Indeed! it will be cheering just at this time, so pray tell it me!" answered the unfortunate planter.

"Well, sir, I asked him for The Retreat a sum that would cover the mortgage, the interest to date, and leave a few thousands over."

"I would rather have the place and no money, than have gold without it," sadly said Basil Branch.

"I knew your attachment for it, Mr. Branch, but, as it had to go, I determined to do the best I could for you, so I sold it at the highest price I could get, and if you will accompany me to my bank, I will pay you the three thousand I have for you."

Basil Branch seemed to feel most bitterly the loss of his place, and well knew what a great shock it would be to his wife and daughter, for they dearly loved the old home.

But he had only himself to blame for its loss, and so went with his agent to the bank, received his money, and then started back to his hotel.

On the way he passed the Hall of Fortune, the elegant gambling saloon, where he had sunk his fortune, and hesitated at the door.

It was a fearful temptation to him, for with him he had nearly twenty thousand dollars, and surely the tide of fortune must turn in his favor ere he could lose so large a sum, and perhaps he could double it.

Into the hallway he went and again paused, while he became pallid and trembled with the excitement of the temptation.

"No, no, I will not yield, no matter how I am tempted," he suddenly cried, and turning quickly he left the gambling hall and went to his hotel, where he told Mrs. Branch and Pearl of the loss of their home.

They were deeply pained, but seeing how great was his sorrow, they bore up, and said they could be happy in some little cottage on the outskirts of town, while he could get some position as a clerk.

"No, no, I would die in an office, and I'll seek work more congenial," he said.

"But what will you do, Basil?" asked Mrs. Branch.

"I will tell you what I will do, Annabel.

"Merle Monte has bought an elegant clipper ship and given it to Captain Trenor, and I will seek the youth, tell him of my misfortune, and ask him to give me a letter to Trenor, requesting him to make me his first officer, for I have enough money to buy you a pretty little home in the outskirts of the town, and my pay will support you and Pearl comfortably."

The more they talked over the matter, the more all three considered that this was the best course to pursue, and accordingly Basil Branch started to visit the youthful master of Monte Manor.

CHAPTER X.

BASIL BRANCH ASKS A FAVOR.

MERLE MONTE was just sitting down to dinner, in his grand dining-room, when the card of Basil Branch was brought in to him.

Instantly he sent to have the gentleman join him at the table, and a seat was placed for him.

In spite of his having lived in fine style all his life, Basil Branch was almost dumb with amazement at the grandeur of the dining-room, the costliness of the silver and gold service, and the air of Oriental luxury upon all around him.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Branch, for I was thinking of yourself and family to-day, and intending to call soon, and ask pardon for seeming neglect, but the truth is, I have had a great deal to occupy me of late."

"I shall think so, Captain Monte—"

"Pardon me, but I am plain *Mister* Monte now," interrupted Merle.

Basil Branch bowed in acquiescence, and continued:

"Your cares of moving in and fitting up your home have doubtless taken all of your time, Mr. Monte?"

"Oh, no, for Mezrak has attended to all that, and I have plenty of slaves to do the work.

"But will not yourself, Mrs. Branch and Milamaiselle Pearl do me the honor to dine with me to-morrow?"

"With pleasure, I will say for all of us, *Monsieur* Monte.

"But I came up to-day to ask a favor of you,

although it seems unkind to worry you, after all you have done for me and mine."

"Not at all, so speak out, for I assure you I am wholly at your service, my dear sir."

"Well, the truth is, Monte, I have been a very wicked man, and my life of gambling has almost beggared my family—"

"My purse is open to you, Mr. Branch."

"No! no! not that, I thank you: but what I would ask is a letter from you to Captain Trenor, to give me a berth with him as first officer."

"Certainly, but do you think you should like to go to sea after your past experiences there?" asked Merle, significantly.

"Frankly, no; but though I have enough money to buy my wife a little home, and to bring her a small income, I must do something to add to our revenue of support, and choose the sea to an office life."

"But your home up the river?"

"I have squandered it in playing cards, for it was mortgaged; my agent had to let it go, and saved for me but three thousand dollars from the wreck."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, sir; and I thank him for that."

"Well, I will give you the letter to Captain Trenor with pleasure, and, as I presented him with his vessel, he can hardly refuse to give you the berth you ask."

"But come to-morrow and dine with me, and afterward, as I have to run up the river in my yacht on a matter of business I will ask you and your family to accompany me."

Basil Branch accepted the invitation with pleasure, and soon after took his leave, and with a lighter heart, for he had resisted the temptation to gamble away his money, and had a prospect of getting employment that would support his family by his own work.

CHAPTER XI.

A SURPRISE.

AT the appointed hour on the following day Basil Branch his wife and Pearl drove up to the elegant mansion of Merle Monte in his carriage, which he had sent for them to the hotel.

Both Mrs. Branch and Pearl were prepared for what they might expect, from what Basil had told them: but they were utterly amazed when they discovered the magnificence surrounding the young master of Monte Manor, so far surpassing anything they had ever dreamed of.

Merle met them at the *porte cochée* as they drove up, and Pearl flushed as she saw that they were not the only guests, for in the background stood Vance Murell, handsomer than ever, and his eyes told her how glad he was to see her.

"I have asked Mr. Murell to join us, so we are a kind of family party," said Merle, with a smile, as the ladies entered the house and were each one received by a quadroon maid to show them to their rooms to rearrange their toilets before dinner, while a valet rendered the same service toward Basil Branch, and Merle and Vance Murell, who was the commander of his yacht, went into the parlors to await their coming.

Upon descending to the parlors, and then upon

entering the dining-room and beholding the royal splendor about her, Mrs. Branch was too well-bred to express her admiration openly; but in the mother's brain flashed the thought:

"Oh! if he and Pearl would only fall in love with each other, and they shall, if I can so have it."

For this little plot the mother was to be pardoned, kind reader, for of all unselfish hearts in the world, mothers' hearts are the most so, when the good of their children is concerned, and they will deprive themselves of everything for the happiness of those whom they have brought into the world, and it was no wonder that Mrs. Branch wished to see her beautiful daughter the proud mistress of that kingly home.

After dinner, which was fit for an emperor, and served by liveried slaves behind the chair of each guest to attend their every want, Merle showed his friends over his mansion, and then the party boarded the Dragon, which was at anchor just off the shore.

The first thing that struck the guests upon going on board of the beautiful craft was that her white crew had given place to a black one.

They were half a hundred in number, slaves whom Merle Monte had purchased, and every one had been selected as a good sailor, having been for years on the river and along the Gulf shores.

They were all attired in a neat uniform, drilled to perfection in every duty, and presented a strange and startling sight when contrasted with the former crew.

The yacht, too, had been overhauled from truck to keel, and the same magnificence everywhere seen in the mansion had been carried out on the vessel.

At the command of their captain, Vance Murell, the black crew sprung to their posts, the anchor came up with a chorus, by no means unmusical, as the men sped around the capstan, keeping time with their tread to their song, and then the white sails were set, and the beautiful schooner went flying against the swift current, with a strong breeze astern of her.

It was not yet sunset, when Pearl cried:

"Mr. Monte, there is our old home, my birth-place, and the dearest spot on earth to me," and she pointed to a lordly mansion, embowered in a grove of orange and live-oak trees.

"But oh! how changed," said Mrs. Branch, while her husband remarked sadly:

"Yes, the new owner of The Retreat has beautified it wonderfully, and made it far more lovely than it was in its palmyest days in the long ago."

"He has spent a fortune on the house and grounds alone," returned Mrs. Branch.

"Yes, it is a lovely spot," said Merle.

"And he has purchased all of the old slaves, papa says."

"How dearly I would like to see some of their old faces, and ask them if they are happy."

"But they must be, for all their homes now are really lovely, with the pleasant surroundings the master has environed them with," and Pearl pointed to the distant "quarter," or negro village, in the rear of the mansion, and which was composed of half a hundred pretty cottages.

"If you wish to see your old slaves, Made-

moiselle Pearl, I will land that you may do so," said Merle.

"Not for the world, sir, would I ask such a favor of a stranger."

"But I know the owner of the estate well, having met him some time ago, and I will request it."

It was evident that all wished to land, yet did not care to intrude upon the new owner.

But Merle, seeing this, at once ordered the schooner headed for the landing, where a handsome pavilion, or summer-house had been erected upon the river-bank.

The anchor was let fall, a boat lowered, and calling to Vance Murell to accompany them, Merle and his guests started for the mansion, Mezrak, the interminable shadow of his master, bringing up the rear.

The mansion was open, and as they approached, those who had dwelt there saw that it had been newly furnished and most elegantly so.

Upon reaching the piazza, Merle stepped slightly in advance, and said with a smile:

"Mr. Branch, I welcome you, your wife and daughter back to your own home, which I purchased for you, that you might not lose it."

"It has been fitted up for you according to my taste and refurnished, while all the slaves you formerly owned, are here to receive you, and it is my opinion, Mr. Branch, that you will find it more to your taste to remain here and cultivate your plantation, than to go to sea as an officer, even under so genial a man as is Captain Trenor, whom, with Captain Meredith and Little Belt, or rather now Miss Belle Denham, we will find in the parlor awaiting us."

"Yes, here we are, having arrived ahead of you," cried Captain Trenor, advancing from the hall, followed by Mayo Meredith, upon whose arm leant a lady of rare loveliness, and in whom no one could have recognized Little Belt, the ex-lieutenant of the Gold Ship.

Words can never portray the surprise, confusion, joy and gratitude of Basil Branch, his wife and daughter, and to escape their thanks Merle called for the slaves, who were awaiting *en masse* in the rear of the mansion, and a general jubilee was held far into the night, when Merle Monte was kept, with Captains Meredith and Trenor, and Miss Denham, as the guests of The Retreat.

CHAPTER XII.

THE MASTER OF THE RETREAT.

BASIL BRANCH had gone sadly wrong in his youthful days; but it was perhaps owing to the fact that he had had no good training, for his father, an austere, gloomy man, had, like his father before him, lived the life of a hermit in his handsome house, forbidding all social intercourse with the neighboring planters.

There was a dark history in the lives of the family, each father handing it down to son, how they were the heirs to a noble title and estate in England, but that it had been sworn away by the grandfather of Basil, when he came to America, in return for which he got the woman of his love.

That oath was to be binding upon future generations, the elder Branch had so pledged himself; but, when Basil's father lay upon his death-

bed and told the story to his son, and exacted the oath from him, he had refused at once to take it, and then had heard the words:

"Unless you do, then not one dollar of the inheritance do you get."

The man was dying, a few more hours at furthest and he would be dead; but he had yet strength to revoke his will, and he meant to do so, because his son would not bind himself by an oath that his grandfather had foolishly taken and he also.

Then came a black crime, of how the failing breath of a dying man was hastened away by a pillow placed over his head, and the heir, Basil Branch, going out into the cool night air to get calm once more, while the slaves laid his father out, little dreaming that the son was a murderer.

It was this memory that had haunted Basil Branch through life, and made him a reckless gambler to drown conscience in excitement.

And upon the same night, as he stood facing the cool breeze and collecting his wild thoughts, he had heard sounds upon the river that told him a plantation boat was in danger, and calling his own black crew he had dashed to the rescue and saved Annabel Tracey from the power of her old lover, Dupont Pierson, known in these pages as Captain Pierre, the Sea Marauder.

The maiden's father had been wounded in defending her, and was carried to The Retreat to die, and the young girl was left an orphan, and Basil Branch became her protector, her lover and her husband.

For a long time he had tried to go in the right path, but the "still small voice of conscience" would drive him almost to madness at times, and the result was his taking to the cup of intoxication and gambling, and year by year his wife's fortune and his own faded away, until at last he accidentally came upon a smugglers' boat, and to retrieve his losses allied himself with the band, to, in the end, in sheer desperation, go with Brandt, the Buccaneer, as his lieutenant.

Fortune had favored him well in rescuing his wife and daughter from the power of his old enemy, Captain Pierre, and in saving his neck from the gallows, while above all his secret life remained hidden from the public eye, and from those he loved, and now he found himself once more, with all the fortune he had once had again under his control, and life opening for him a new pathway.

Merle Monte knew him as he was, and yet he it was who had so nobly befriended him, and from that day he would show the brave and generous youth that he was not unworthy of his kindness, and that his sins were of the head, not the heart.

All these thoughts, and more, too, passed through the brain of Basil Branch that night of his return to his old home, as he paced to and fro in his elegant library, when all others in the house had retired.

The murder of his father, his acts of law-breaking and piracy, he could not banish from memory; but he had turned his back on crime, and determined to live a different life in the future, and with this determination he went to his bed, and sleep, deep and refreshing, such as he had not known for years, came to him.

CHAPTER XIII.

MERLE MONTE MAKES A VISIT.

AFTER a few days' visit to The Retreat passed in enjoyment—for there were sail and row-boats there for excursions on the river, the stables were filled with fine horses and carriages, and nothing had been left undone to add to the happiness and comfort of the inmates—Merle Monte set sail in the Dragon for his own home, promising to come again and visit his friends.

In the mean time Captain Trenor's fine packet clipper ship having been fully gotten ready for sea, the mate had sailed her up the river for her captain, and on the run back, as the wind was blowing half a gale, Merle Monte and Captain Meredith went on board the splendid vessel to sail back in her to the city and test her speed with that of the Schooner, under Vance Murell's management.

Basil Branch, his wife and daughter, with Belle Denham—who had taken her maiden name again, upon casting off her male attire, and had accepted the pressing invitation of all at The Retreat to visit them—all assembled at the pavilion on the river-bank to see the two vessels start on their race, and waved them God-speed as they departed.

The clipper was dressed in canvas from deck to truck, and bounded away like a mad racer with the wind free on her stern quarter; but Vance Murell, to see just what the Dragon could do, had not sent up his topsails or set extra jibs.

"That won't do, Murell!" shouted Captain Trenor in high glee through his trumpet.

"She'll walk away from you at a lively pace!" and he added in a lower tone:

"Mr. Monte, I've christened this craft the *Merle Monte*, and I will say for her that there is no hull of her tonnage that can be driven through the water faster than her canvas will send her.

"See, we are dropping the schooner."

"She certainly is fast, Captain Trenor, for there are few vessels that can drop the Dragon without her topsails set.

"Ah! Murell is spreading more sail."

And up to the long, tapering topmasts went the snowy duck, and catching the breeze, the additional sail was at once noticeable, for the schooner bent more to the pressure, the wall of foam about her bows grew higher and whiter, and in a few moments she was under the stern of the clipper.

A bend in the river here necessitated a short tack, when Vance Murell, who held the helm himself, shot his little vessel quickly about, and darted away right across the bows of the clipper in a masterly way that brought a cheer from those on the ship for his daring and skill.

Then more canvas was spread upon the Dragon, and she led the *Merle Monte* a lively chase to the home of Merle Monte, having her anchor down, sails furled, and all on board ship-shape when the ship swept up.

As Captain Trenor was to sail the next day for his trip North, for the vessel was to be a New York packet, Merle bade him good-by, along with Captain Meredith, who had also to make a short cruise in the *Sea Wolf*, and land-

ing at his home, drove down to the city in his carriage.

He had said he had a visit to make, and his destination was the office of Henry Mordecai, the real estate broker.

That worthy was in his office, and evidently in a good humor with himself and the world in general, for he sat at his desk in a smiling mood.

Seeing the handsome, elegantly dressed youth enter, he naturally supposed he had a customer of importance, and rising quickly, said in his obsequious way:

"How do, sir; be seated, sir, and command my services."

But Merle remained standing, while he said calmly:

"Mr. Henry Mordecai, I believe."

"The same, sir, and at your service."

"You were the agent of Planter Basil Branch?"

"I am, sir."

"You sold his estate of The Retreat?"

"I did, sir," and Mr. Mordecai wondered to what all this tended, though there was that about his visitor which prevented his treating his questions as impertinent.

"Well, Mr. Henry Mordecai, I wish you to listen distinctly to what I have to say."

"Certainly, sir."

"Some time ago, just when Brandt, the Buccaneer made his escape from on board the Sea Marauder, where he was in irons, a person called into your office to purchase the estate of The Retreat.

"Do you remember the circumstance?"

"I do, sir," and Mr. Mordecai was becoming a trifle nervous under the eagle eyes of his visitor.

"The person was a man about my size, but with gray hair and beard, and gave his name as Henry Smith?"

"Yes, sir."

"And to him the property was sold?"

"Yes, sir."

"There was a mortgage upon the property for sixty-five thousand dollars, and it drew an illegal interest, which ran it up twelve thousand dollars more, making seventy-seven thousand dollars, and you consented to give a clear deed for the place for one hundred thousand dollars in cash?"

"May I ask what is all this to you?" said Mordecai, beginning to lose his self-control.

"Simply a matter of justice, sir, for you led Mr. Basil Branch to believe you realized but three thousand dollars over all mortgages, interests and expenses, and paid that sum to him, stealing from him the remaining twenty thousand."

"How dare you make such an accusation against me, sir, when my character is above reproach?" and Henry Mordecai turned livid with rage, while he clutched his chair as though about to strike the insulter down.

But Merle answered, with the utmost calmness:

"You are one of those harpies who are considered honest until they are caught stealing, and I pronounce you a fraud and a robber."

"This to me?" and the agent raised the chair.

"Oh, yes! and more too, for you shall disgorge the property you have stolen from Basil Branch."

"By Heaven! I'll call my clerks from the outer office, and have you thrown into the street!"

"Don't do it, Mr. Henry Mordecai, for if you do I'll send you to prison."

The man was cowed by the youth before him, and he gasped forth:

"Who are you?"

"At present I am known as Merle Monte."

"Merle Monte! The one whom they call the Boy Prince?"

"Yes."

"The capturer of the sea pirates?" continued Henry Mordecai, in a low tone.

"Yes; and the capturer of a land pirate—one Henry Mordecai, Esquire."

"My God!"

Without noticing the ejaculation, Merle went on to say:

"You asked me who I am, and I have told you; but let me also tell you that I was disguised with a gray beard and wig when I came here to see you, and, as Henry Smith, bought the Branch Plantation and slaves."

"Now that you know me, Mr. Mordecai, you will see the propriety of instantly writing a draft on the bank, in the name of Basil Branch, for the sum of twenty thousand dollars, of which you defrauded him."

"I'll not do it, for that was my commission."

"No, it was what you stole; for you know you had no idea of selling the place, but of making it your home, until you found you could rob the owner of the neat little sum of twenty thousand dollars, in addition to the other sums you have stolen from him."

"Now, sir, write that draft."

"I will not."

Merle stepped to the door, and almost instantly he returned and Mezrak accompanied him.

At sight of the slave, Henry Mordecai trembled, yet uttered no word.

"Mezrak," said Merle calmly, "Mr. Henry Mordecai intends writing a draft in favor of Mr. Basil Branch, and I wish you to go in the yacht and carry it to The Retreat."

"Yes, master."

"And say to Mr. Branch that Mr. Mordecai made a trifling mistake in settling with him, and if he has any business to transact again, my advice to him is not to make Mr. Mordecai his agent."

"Yes, master."

"Now, sir, you can draw up the draft, and my slave will deliver it."

"No, sir."

"Well, sir, you must take the consequences."

"Mezrak."

"Master."

"Seize that man and carry him to prison."

Mezrak instantly sprung upon the alarmed agent with the agility of a cat, and while he held one hand over his mouth to prevent outcry, began to put irons on him with the other with an expertness that was remarkable.

The man was now as pallid as death, and Merle said:

"My slave will allow you to speak, and you need utter but one word.

"But if you cry out to give an alarm you shall die.

"Now, sir, will you write that draft?"

Mezrak removed his hand and the trembling wretch gasped forth:

"Yes!"

"Take his irons off, Mezrak!"

The order was obeyed.

"Now sit there at your desk, Henry Mordecai and write the draft, and the matter ends here."

"You will not let Basil Branch prosecute me?"

"No."

"Nor do so yourself?"

"No."

The man sighed deeply at having to disgorge the amount he had looked upon as his own, and wrote the draft, which Merle glanced over and handed to Mezrak, while he said:

"Go in my yacht, Mezrak, and say to Mr. Murell that as Mr. Branch and his family are coming to the city in a few days, to remain and bring them down."

"Yes, master; but Mezrak will return at once?"

"Yes; take a small boat in tow and return in it."

Mezrak then departed, and Merle turned once more to the agent, who was white with suppressed rage.

"Mr. Mordecai," he said, "Mr. Branch is my friend, and I warn you now to drop the little plot you told me, believing me to be Mr. Smith, that you had of marrying some day his daughter Pearl, as you had in some way found out that she would inherit a fortune in England.

"Good-afternoon, sir," and Merle's visit to the fraudulent agent had ended.

CHAPTER XIV.

MERLE RECEIVES A VISIT.

THE third day after his return from The Retreat, Merle Monte was seated in his library after dinner, engaged in reading, when a slave entered and said:

"A man to see you, master."

"Who is he, Benedict?"

"I do not know, master; but he says it is important that he should see you."

"Ask him to come in," returned Merle; and soon after a little old man, with gold spectacles and a dress that looked the shabby-genteel, entered the library.

He bowed several times to Merle, and said obsequiously:

"I hope I see you, sir."

"I am sure that you do, if you have not lost your eyesight," answered Merle, with a smile.

"Well, sir, I did not wish to intrude upon the great Persian prince, as men call you; but the truth is, I have come to do you a favor."

"It is kind of you indeed; but how can you serve me, my friend?" and Merle seemed really amused with his visitor.

"You have a yacht, sir?"

"I have."

"The schooner Dragon?"

"That is her name."

"Once known as the Gold Ship?"

"True."

"On account of your having carried your treasure—your vast inheritance—about the seas in her?"

"Yes, it was so reported."

"Your Gold Ship was constantly hunted by pirates who wanted your treasure, and cruisers who looked upon you as a pirate."

"True, my friend."

"One of those pursuers was the schooner Sea Marauder?"

"It was."

"Under that arch pirate, Captain Pierre?"

"Yes."

"You captured the schooner?"

"I did."

"But not her captain, sir?"

"You are mistaken there, my inquisitive friend, for I did capture her captain, but he escaped, yet whether he is alive or dead, I do not know."

"I can tell you."

"You?"

"Yes; old man that I am, I can tell you whether Captain Pierre is alive or dead."

"Well, what is your price, old gentleman, for the information?"

"Bah! I want not your gold," said the visitor, in a tone of disgust.

"Pardon me, but as I have to pay for everything I get, I thought you had a price on your knowledge."

"You mistake me, for I came to render you a service, and I wish no pay for it."

"Again I ask your pardon."

"Granted, Sir Prince; but now to the Sea Marauder."

"He still lives, I suppose?"

"He does."

"Where?"

"In the city."

"New Orleans?"

"Yes, Sir Prince."

"You know this?"

"I do."

"How know you it?"

"I saw him last night."

"Indeed?"

"Truth, and I talked with him, and more, I engaged to get him a crew to cut your vessel out."

"Ha!" and Merle half-sprung to his feet.

"You did this?"

"Yes, for a purpose."

"And what was your purpose?"

"To capture him and a few other precious doves of a like feather with him."

"Ah! then he is plotting to seize my vessel, and again turn to piracy?"

"Yes, in part."

"How do you mean?"

"He knows that the Sea Wolf has gone to sea, and that the Mexican cutter, the brig and his vessel, are not in sailing trim; but that your schooner is."

"He knows that you keep a large crew on board, and that it will take a heavy force of men to seize her; but he says it is worth it, as you have not yet secured the treasure from the hold, for he has kept a spy upon every movement of the Dragon, and that he will be simply repaid by getting your gold and gems."

"Then he will pay off his men, or give them the schooner, if they wish to keep up piracy, while he lands at some port with his wealth and lives like a prince."

"This is a fine little plot of Captain Pierre," sneered Merle.

"It is indeed, Sir Prince, and that is not all."

"What, more, old gentleman?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell it me, I pray you."

"Well, sir, he has certain feelings of revenge against Basil Branch and his wife."

"Ha!"

"You know this, Senor Monte?"

"I do."

"Well, sir, he intends to capture Miss Branch."

"By heaven! but my friend, you do tell me news."

"I knew that I would, but such is his intention; to kidnap Pearl Branch, and by dragging her down gain his revenge upon her parents."

"My dear sir, you render me a great favor, and as you look not in the very best of circumstances, and old age is creeping upon you, you must pardon me if I in return make you a little present as a souvenir, so tell me frankly what I can do for you?"

"Head this villain Pierre Dupont off in his deviltry, Merle Monte, and you repay me."

"See! do you not know me?"

"I do not, I confess."

"I am Little Belt," was the low reply.

CHAPTER XV.

BELLE DENHAM'S PLOT.

"Miss DENHAM!" and Merle Monte sprung to his feet, the picture of amazement.

"Yes, I am Belle Denham, Merle."

"In that disguise?"

"Yes."

"When I left you at The Retreat two days ago, the guest of Mr. Branch and his family?"

"You did."

"I thought you had given up disguises with the death of Brandt, the Buccaneer?"

"Can I be blamed when I have discovered what I have?"

"I do not blame you, only I hoped that you would have no more cause to leave off the attire that belongs to you."

"But you see that I have?"

"Yes, and wish you to tell me all about it."

"I will, and commence my story by saying that the schooner and clipper had hardly gotten out of sight when a man arrived at the plantation with a note for me."

"It was from one whom I had often engaged in different work, and whom I had set upon the task of finding out if Captain Pierre was dead or not, for I had a presentiment that he meant you harm, and the Branch family also, if he had the power."

"The note is here."

She handed to Merle a note with the seal broken.

It was addressed to

"MISS BELLE DENHAM,

"CARE OF MR. BASIL BRANCH,

"The Retreat Plantation."

Opening it, Merle read as follows:

"MISS DENHAM:—

"I called at your quarters in town, to find that you had gone up to the plantation of Mr. Branch, so send this note by a messenger to you there."

"I have to report that I have found the Sea Marauder, and he means mischief, and what you do to prevent must be done at once. MERKLE."

"Well, Little Belt—I beg pardon, Miss Denham," said Merle when he had finished reading the missive.

"I at once told Mr. Branch that I must return to the city, and he offered to escort me, but I refused to take him away from his family, and a crew of his slaves sailed me down."

"Going to the writer of this note, who is a *restaurateur*, I at once heard from him that the Sea Marauder and the Indian Peon were in the city, and that they were secretly getting a crew together to seize the Dragon; but he also said that the fate of Brandt and his pirates had had such an effect upon seamen that it was hard to get men bold enough to make the venture."

"I at once hit upon a plot to ferret out his plans, so disguised myself as an old sea captain, got Merkle to aid me, and I went to the *cafe* of Giro, the same one who got Captain Pierre's crew for him before."

"I told Giro that I had been sent to him by a smuggler on the Mississippi Sound, and that I was old Carlo, the Caribbean pirate, and had to wreck my vessel on the Mexican Coast, to save the lives of myself and crew."

"That I wanted a new craft, or was ready

to enlist in any undertaking, for I had two-score good men at my back.

"I saw that he was delighted, and he told me that I should meet one who desired a crew, and he would no doubt make me his first luff.

"Then he took me to the bank of the river below the city, where two Indians were encamped, as I believed them to be.

"But, Merle, they were none other than Captain Pierre and Peon, his Mexican-Indian ally, and the same two we saw at their camp when we came up the river, for Pearl attracted our attention to them."

"By Neptune! Little Belt, but he is as good at disguises as you are," said Merle.

"Well, Merle, I agreed with Captain Pierre to be with my men at a certain point on the river three nights from this, and we were to seize your vessel, for he was to join me there with half a hundred men in boats.

"In the mean time he said he had some work for Peon to do up the river, as there was an heiress to carry off, from whose parents a large ransom could be secured.

"Now this I found meant Pearl Branch; and I, to carry out my plot, suggested that it would be a good idea to rob your house here too, as on account of its isolated situation, it could be done, and the schooner escape to sea, for there was nothing in the city or down the river to stop her.

"Having agreed upon this plan, and told him where I could be found if needed, I left, and changing my disguise, have come to tell you of my discovery."

"Miss Denham, you are a wonder, and knowing what I do, it will be a very easy matter to thwart Captain Pierre and capture him and his whole band.

"But, having put on disguise again, you will have to keep it up and aid me."

"I will gladly do so."

"Well, I will engage for you forty good men, and you will meet Captain Pierre with them, and together you will board the schooner.

"Once on board and I will have force enough, with the aid of your men, to take the whole party.

"But the schooner has gone up the river now, to bring back Mr. Branch and family, and you also, as I supposed, to visit me, so Pearl will be here, and consequently safe from being kidnapped.

"When is this plot to be carried out?"

"The third night from this."

"Then we have ample time, and I will set Mezrak to work at once, for he returned this morning from The Retreat," and soon after Belle Denham returned to her lodgings at Merkle's cafe, to prepare for the plot to capture the Sea Marauder.

CHAPTER XVI.

PEON ON THE SCENT.

WHEN Belle Denham, in her disguise of an old Caribbean pirate by the name of Carlo, left the home of Giro, where the conference was held with the Sea Marauder captain, Peon, the faithful friend of the pirate, quietly followed her.

Peon was as cunning as a fox, and had remarkably good sense withal, and he thought he had detected something suspicious about the pretended old pirate.

Not that he believed that there was any disguise, or that it was other than the Pirate of the Caribbees, for he did not; but the idea struck him that he might be anxious for Captain Pierre to select a vessel, get what men he could, and then, with his larger force at once turn the tables upon the Sea Marauder.

Consequently he thought he would disguise himself in some way, seek the place where Carlo had said he put up, and make what discoveries he could about him.

To Merkle's, therefore, he went, disguised as a mulatto, and his Indian complexion aided the disguise, and asked Merkle, in a low tone, for Captain Carlo.

As the pretended mulatto said he came from Giro's, where Captain Carlo had just been, Merkle told him that his guest was in, and how to find the room.

Peon went up-stairs cautiously, approached the door, and stooping, put his eye to the key-hole.

To his surprise he saw another person than Captain Carlo had appeared, though still an old man, and he was adjusting a pair of spectacles to his nose before the mirror.

"It is the same man, in another disguise," muttered Peon, and he went back to the stairway and waited.

Soon the door opened and out stepped Belle Denham in the same disguise in which the reader saw her in her visit to Merle.

Peon hastily descended the stairs and passed out of the house, and soon after Belle Denham came from the door into the street.

"Yes, he is the same that was at the captain's, and I'll follow and find out what he is up to," said Peon.

And he followed the scent so well that he saw her enter the palatial home of Merle Monte, and then come forth, accompanied by the young master himself, who placed her in one of his own boats, and ordered Mezrak to row her to the city.

Peon was fishing, or pretending to, out in the river near the bank, and as soon as Merle returned to the house he seized his oars and pulled rapidly down the stream after the boat, and again beheld Belle Denham enter the house of the *Restaurateur* Merkle.

While she was in the Monte manor, he

learned through a slave whom he had questioned, that the yacht had gone up to The Retreat Plantation, but was to return in a couple of days with Mr. Branch and family as guests of his master.

This decided Peon upon his course, and he felt assured that the old man was not whom he professed to be, but a detective, laying a plot to capture Captain Pierre.

Instantly he went off to communicate his discovery, and soon Captain Pierre was in the possession of all the facts.

"Tell Senor Giro to come here, Peon," he said, without making any comment.

Peon left upon his errand, and soon returned with Giro, to whom Captain Pierre made the Indian tell over the whole story.

"You are worth your weight in gold, Peon," said Giro.

"Look here, Giro, you played off Brandt, the Buccaneer, on me for a lieutenant, and I hope you are not playing me false now," said Captain Pierre threateningly.

"I do not understand you, Captain Pierre," said Giro, excitedly.

"You brought that old man to me?"

"True, and believed him what he represented himself to be.

"Bah! did I want to sell you, Pierre, I could do it at any time and share the price on your head with no man.

"You are nervous, and it makes you suspicious.

"Take some brandy, and let us talk over the best way to plot against this old fellow, who must evidently be a spy of the Senor Monte."

"Well, Giro, I retract what I said, for you have got it in your power to sell me to my foes without all this plot, did you so wish."

"Now I have formed a plan."

"Name it."

"It is to act at once."

"How?"

"Well, Peon reports the Gold Ship, which Monte now calls his yacht Dragon, to be up at The Retreat Plantation.

"Yes."

"And where is Mezrak?" and Captain Pierre turned to Peon.

"At the palace, for he it was who came with the old man to the city."

"Good! then we have him out of the way, and my old lieutenant, Vance Murell, who played his cards well to save his neck, and I do not blame him either, is now captain of the schooner, on board of which he has a crew of slaves numbering half a hundred."

"Yes, said Giro.

"Well, to-morrow night the yacht shall be in my possession, and our fortune is made, for Merle Monte has never removed

his boxes of treasure from the craft; has he, Peon?"

"No, senor."

"Then to-morrow night my counterplot shall thwart Merle Monte's plot."

CHAPTER XVII.

CAPTAIN PIERRE FORMS A DOUBLE PLOT.

"BUT, Captain Pierre, how can you act without men?" asked Giro.

"The men you must get, Giro."

"As you know, captain, we have thus far gotten but twenty."

"That may be; but here, sell these jewels and pay large bounties, and promise them that I will give them ten years' pay when the schooner is mine.

"Now go, Giro, and get me the men, and not less than eighty, besides those we have, for there must be no failure in this work."

As Captain Pierre spoke he took from his belt a number of jewels, and handed them to Giro, who departed, with the remark:

"I'll do all in my power, captain, and if anything will buy men, it is gold in hand before shipping, for it gives them a hope that the promises made of more when the work is done, will be kept."

"Now, Peon," said Captain Pierre, when Giro had departed:

"I wish you to help me."

"Certainly, senor."

"I wish you to take this gold and go down to the river and purchase some old craft.

"I do not care how old and worthless, so that it will get a crew up the river.

"I will send the men whom Giro gets, on board to-night, and then you set sail.

"Run to a point a league above The Retreat, where you will find a small creek, and hide there until you hear from me."

"And you, senor?" asked Peon.

"Well, Peon, Merle Monte has not had his new slaves long enough to make faithful Mezraks out of all of them, and I will see what gold will do with one or more of them."

"Be cautious, senor."

"Oh, I will be, for I work for a fortune, and also for revenge, and either one are wonderful incentives to my nature; but now lose no time in getting a craft, and I will remain here and plot out just what to do."

Peon departed upon his important errand, and Captain Pierre began to pace his room, his brow bent, eyes downcast, and his brain plotting deviltry for gold and revenge.

"I would like to punish Vance Murell in some way, for being a lucky dog, when I have been so unfortunate; but I must get him off the yacht, or his eagle eyes, that seem never to sleep, will see something sus-

picious in the lugger, or whatever craft Peon gets, coming near the schooner, and he may treat her to a sample of her guns, and his example will make his black crew like devils.

"I wonder if I could not tempt him?"

"No, for he is in love with the girl, Peon says, and with Merle Monte for a master, gold will not bribe him, so that is out of the question.

"Ah! I have a happy thought, and with my snow-white hair, which that alligator turned so for me in a minute of time, and my beard shaved off, I can pass muster for a respectable planter.

"Now for the metamorphosis from an Indian to a gentleman," and Captain Pierre set to work to change his disguise, and succeeded so well that when, two hours after, Peon came into the room and saw an elegantly-dressed, white-haired stranger, he started back quickly, and said:

"Beg pardon, senor, but I have mistaken the room."

"Ha! ha! ha! Well, Peon, I am changed if you do not know me."

"Senor Captain?"

"Yes, Peon."

"*Hombre de Dios!* but you are changed!" exclaimed the Mexican Indian, who always swore in his native tongue when excited.

"Well, Peon, what luck?"

"I have a fair craft, senor, a regular plantation coaster, old but good enough, and I bought her at the yard for half a thousand pesos."

"Good! and where is she?"

"All ready to sail, and below the city, off our camp, with two men on board, for, as I had gotten a few stores to last the crew a couple of days, I did not wish to leave her deserted."

"That was well thought of, my good friend— Ah! that is Giro's knock, and I'll see if he knows me in my fine clothes and shaven face.

"Come in!"

It was the host of the lodging-house, and he entered with a smile, but upon seeing, as he supposed, a stranger, he said:

"Peon, I came to see your master, but as he is not here, I will call in again."

"He is here, senor," said Peon,

"Where?" and Giro glanced about the large, old fashioned room.

"I am here, Giro."

"*Sacre!* is that you, Captain Pierre?"

"It certainly is, Giro, and I feel that I can run the gantlet of any eyes now, after deceiving you and Peon."

"But come, what tidings?"

"I was successful."

"That is splendid; but how many men?"

"Just four-score, senor."

"Good! Where are they?"

"They can be sent at dark to any spot you name."

"My vessel lies at our camp, and they must be there as soon after dark as possible; and you, Peon, set sail for the rendezvous I told you of up the river."

"Is there a man among them you can place in charge, Giro?"

"Yes, senor, a young fellow who was once an officer in the English Navy."

"Then place him in command."

"Now I'll be off, for I have a double plot to carry out," and after a few words more, Captain Pierre left the lodging-house alone, while Peon also departed for the vessel he had purchased, and the plot for revenge and gold had been started.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CLEVER GAME TO PLAY.

UPON the bank of the river, fronting Monte Manor, a large boat-house stood, and here a crew of slaves, four men and a coxswain, were constantly in attendance to await any desire of their young master for a row on the stream or a pull to the city below.

Toward this handsome boat-house a small boat was rowing some two hours after the departure of Captain Pierre from his lodging-house, and a glance at the person seated in the stern was sufficient to recognize that worthy in his new disguise, which was really in his natural self.

At the oars were two burly-looking negroes, who pulled a swift, strong stroke.

As the boat touched the shore the coxswain of Merle Monte's crew, recognizing the gentlemanly appearance of the pirate, came down and met him, thinking that he was some visitor to the mansion.

"Ah, my man, I am glad to find some one I can question. Is this the home of that wonderful youth, the Senor Monte?" and the pirate dropped a piece of gold into the hand of the negro.

"Yes, massa, it am Master Monte's home," was the polite response.

"I have heard so much of him and his home I had a desire to see the place, so I rowed up for the purpose.

"Is he at home?"

"No, massa, he done drove down to the city."

"Ah! then perhaps you can tell me and show me all I would like to know," and the pirate drew the negro apart from the others.

After some little conversation he asked:

"What is your name, my man?"

"Abram, sah."

"An ancient name, indeed. But, Abram, have you a good master?"

"Oh yes, massa, he am werry good, our massa."

"But you would like to be free, and have only yourself to serve?"

"Yas, massa, ef I could buy my freedom; but I hain't got de money, and never 'spects ter hab."

"I do not know about that, Abram; but are you on duty here to-night?"

"No, massa; I am de day man and Zekiel am in for de night."

"I see."

"Well, Abram, are you anything of a sailor?"

"Yes, massa; I hab foller de sea when I b'long'd ter Massa Claiborne, who hab a plantation on de lower shore."

"How would you like to be a steward on a fine vessel?"

"Werry much, sah."

"Well, Abram, you do as I tell you. Keep your mouth shut, and to-night you shall have gold enough to buy your freedom, and I will take you with me as my steward."

"Golly, massa, but don't talk too fas', for dis heur nigger can't git it all in his head," cried the delighted black.

The wily pirate slowly repeated his words, and the negro asked:

"What do you want me do, massa?"

"I wish you to come here just at dark and tell Zekiel your master ordered you to take his boat and crew and row up to The Retreat Plantation."

"But he didn't tell me so, massa."

"But I do, and you will obey me if you wish to earn your gold and go as my steward."

"See, I have the gold here, and don't mind giving you a hundred dollars to prove I mean what I say."

"Take it, Abram, and slip it in your pocket."

"T'ankee, massa. Now say it ag'in."

"Well, you tell Zekiel that your master ordered him to go to The Retreat and request Mr. and Mrs. Branch to come down and see him at once on an important matter, but not to bring Miss Pearl."

"Yas, sah."

"Tell him to say to them to go on board the yacht and run down in her to Monte Manor."

"Yas, massa, but won't Zeke ketch it when he gits back?"

"No, for he'll say you told him."

"Den I catches it."

"You forget, Abram, that I expect you, after seeing Zeke off, to get into your boat

and row up the river to the Live Oak Point, and I will meet you there."

"Yas, massa."

"Now, here is another hundred in gold, and when you have done as I tell you I will give you a cool thousand more."

"You don't mean no harm, massa, does you?"

"No, no, my man, it is only a joke on them."

"Yas, sah."

"Now I'll get you to show me the grounds and then return to my boat, and I'll go on up the river to await you at Live Oak Point," and ten minutes after the pirate captain was on his way up-stream quite satisfied with his work so far.

It was just after sunset when Vance Murell beheld a small boat approaching the schooner from the other shore, opposite to the one on which the Branch Plantation was situated.

Watching it in the gathering gloom, he observed that its destination was the yacht, and soon he hailed:

"Boat ahoy!"

"Ahoy the yacht! can I come on board, sir?" answered a voice, politely.

"For what purpose?"

"To see your captain and ask his aid."

"Ay, ay," answered Vance Murell, and soon after none other than Captain Pierre appeared over the gangway and raised his hat to the young officer.

"Pardon me, sir, but do I address the commander of this vessel-of-war?"

"Yes, sir, I command the vessel, but it is not a Government cruiser, but simply an armed yacht, owned by Mr. Merle Monte."

"Ah! I have heard of that distinguished young gentleman."

"But, sir, I am forced to ask of you a favor."

"My name is Dupree, and my plantation lies six miles up the river on the other shore, and learning that there was an armed vessel lying off The Retreat, I came down to tell you that I learned only late this afternoon of a plot to attack my house to-night by none other than Pierre Dupont, once known as the chief of a band of Mississippi Marauders, and lately as the captain of the famous schooner Sea Marauder, which Monsieur Monte captured some time since."

"Indeed, sir, can this be true?" asked Vance Murell, in surprise.

"It is, sir."

"And Captain Pierre is to lead the party?"

"So my informant, one of my negroes, a runaway for some time past, informed me, for he came in and gave himself up, feeling that the news he brought would gain pardon for his running away."

"But can you trust him?"

"Assuredly, for he gave me a minute description of their plan, for he acted as the guide of the band, and told me where they were to lie in wait until nearly midnight, and then attack my house, as I am known to keep a great deal of money at home, and also my silver plate is most valuable."

"And you wish me to attack the outlaws, sir?"

"Oh, no, sir, but to go with a few of your men to my house, and remain concealed within, to give the pirates a surprise, and, as I know the land well, I will myself go back by the place where they are hidden, and see if there can be a possibility of the negro deceiving me."

"Did he speak of their force?"

"Yes, he said Pierre had twenty men."

"Indeed! Then I will have to take half of my crew, and will be ready to start at once, sir," and Vance Murell gave the orders to get two boats' crews in readiness, fully armed, and he sighed to think he would not see Pearl that night, as was his wont, for each evening he had been in the habit of visiting the mansion to spend a social hour.

But could he capture Captain Pierre then, it would be a feather in his cap to be proud of.

Five minutes after the two boats of the yacht pulled away up the stream, and over toward the other shore, while the pretended planter rowed in his boat in the direction of the creek, where he said the pirates were concealed.

CHAPTER XIX.

PLAYING HIS CARDS WELL.

As soon as the boats had gotten out of sight in the darkness, Captain Pierre put about and started down the stream.

He kept a safe distance from the yacht in passing, so as not to be seen, and then drawing over toward the left bank, continued on until he reached a bend in the river known as Live Oak Point.

Here he landed with the two men who had served him so faithfully for the last six hours, and said:

"Now, lads, the time is near for you to win the reward I promised you."

They seemed pleased at this statement, and then the three waited in silence and kept their eyes upon the river.

They had not very long to watch before the steady stroke of oars reached their ears and a light appeared in sight.

It was evidently a boat coming up the river.

Nearer it drew and rounding the point, held on up the stream to soon pass out of sight.

"It is the Monte boat, I am confident, but I will soon know," muttered the pirate.

And soon was heard another oar-stroke upon the river.

It was a quick, sharp pull, and evidently was made by but one pair of oars.

Directly for the point it headed, and soon touched the bank.

"Abram."

"Yas, massa," and the negro coxswain of Merle Monte sprang ashore.

"What boat was that ahead of you?"

"Zeke's boat, sah."

"You told him what I bade you say?"

"I did, massa."

"And he has gone with the message to Basil Branch?"

"Yas, massa."

"Good! now follow us in your boat."

Re-entering the boats, they both were urged up the river, going far out to again pass the yacht unseen, and then making a landing above the plantation.

"Now, Abram, you wait here until you see a vessel coming down the river, hail it, and ask if Peon is on board."

"Yas, massa."

"If so, tell him to drop a mud-hook and wait for me here."

"Yas, massa."

The pirate captain then rapidly walked along the levee road toward The Retreat, and soon came in sight of the landing of the plantation.

He saw dark forms standing near the pavilion, and he drew into the shadow of a clump of bushes and waited.

It was not long before several persons came in sight, coming from the mansion, and he distinctly heard the words in a man's voice:

"Who did you see on the yacht, Zekiel?"

"Conrad, sah."

"And he said Captain Murell had gone up the river with two boats to attack some river pirates?"

"Yes, sah."

"And did not know when to expect him back?"

"Not until after midnight, sah."

"And it is now only a little after nine, so we had better go in Zekiel's boat, Annabel, as Conrad does not feel at liberty to take the yacht without Captain Murell was here."

"Certainly, Basil, for we can reach Monte Manor some time before midnight, and I am anxious to know what is the matter," said Mrs. Branch.

All this did Captain Pierre hear, and watching, he saw them go down the bank and enter the boat, which at once pulled off down the river.

"So far all works well, and as I was sure it would, for my plot is too good a one to fail."

"Now to get the fair Pearl into my power and then the schooner," and so saying the pirate ran back to the spot, where he had left Abram and his two oarsmen.

As he drew near he saw a vessel lying close inshore, and evidently made fast to a tree on the bank.

It was a coasting craft, such as was used at that day by the planters to carry their cotton, sugar and other produce to market.

"Ho, Peon! you are there, are you?" he called out.

"Yes, senor, and all ready," said Peon, springing ashore to meet him.

"And Abram?"

"I is here, massa."

"Well, I want you to come with me, while you, Peon, wait here, but get three boats filled with men to be ready to move, and let the balance of the crew wait on the vessel."

"Ay, ay, senor."

The chief and Abram then started off at a run, and arriving in the ornamental grounds of The Retreat, the former said:

"Now, Abram, you go up to the mansion and—"

"Any dogs dere, massa?"

"No, and if there were, they wouldn't bite you."

"Do as I tell you, sir."

"Yas, massa."

"Go up to the house and tell Miss Pearl that her mother and father sent you back to tell her to come, too, and to hurry along as fast as she can."

"Yas, massa."

"Bring her here, and I will meet you."

"Yas, sah."

"Now go, and lose no time if you wish to earn your freedom."

Abram bounded rapidly away and Pierre Dupont began to pace to and fro, as was his wont when deeply excited, and he certainly was nervous, for the end was approaching rapidly that would bring him either success or failure, and the latter meant the hangman's rope he well knew.

CHAPTER XX.

SPRINGING THE TRAP.

PEARL had felt really hurt at having Merle Monte send for her father and mother, and not only leave her out of the invitation, but request that she did not accompany them.

She was most curious to know what it was that was so important as to drag them off in the night, and leave her behind.

For a few moments she felt blue, but then she turned to her harp as a comforter, and was playing a lively waltz, when the negro butler came in to say that:

"Massa Monte's boatman, Abram, wanted to see her."

Quickly she went to the door, and Abram delivered his message well.

She had seen him at the Monte Manor, for his boat had taken them on board the yacht, and she felt no shadow of suspicion.

"I am so glad mamma decided to let me go."

"I will be ready in a moment, and you, William, must look after the house."

It was but a few minutes ere her return, with bonnet and shawl on, and a toilet sachel in her hand.

This Abram took, and the two moved off together down the gravel walk to the river.

But suddenly out from behind an *arbor vitæ* hedge stepped a man, and a heavy cloak was thrown over her head, and a hand pressed so tightly upon her mouth she could utter no cry.

Then she was raised in strong arms, and knew that her captor was running with her, and in great alarm, unable to cry out, and half-smothered, she swooned away.

"Quick, Peon, take charge of this girl, tie her arms, place my handkerchief across her mouth, and then walk down the bank until you get opposite the schooner."

"Take the men, not in the boats, with you, and let them come off in the plantation boats and join in the attack, as soon as they see me board."

"Abram, you come with me!"

"Lordy, massa, am dere goin' ter be a fight?" cried the now thoroughly alarmed negro, feeling that he had been made a tool of in some bold game.

"If those fellows resist there will be a fight."

"Come! no nonsense, or you'll get your freedom in a way you won't like, but serve me well, and you shall have all I promised you."

"Oh Lordy!"

"Silence!"

"I were jist prayin', sah, fer de goo' Lor' ter hab marcy on dis sinful nigger."

"Silence, I say, or I'll knife you."

"Now what is the name of the negro boat-swain in the yacht?"

"Conrad, sah."

"All right, now get in this boat with me."

The negro dared not disobey, and then Captain Pierre turned to his crew and in a low, stern tone:

"Men, you see in me your commander, and it is my intention to make your fortune, and this night."

"I want perfect obedience, no shirking my orders, and all will go well."

"Now give way and let the other two boats follow this one."

The men received these words with a low murmur of approbation, and it was evident that they felt that their commander was a man to command, and meant just what he said.

The oars of three boats were let fall together, and they moved out into the stream, and then the one in which sat Captain Pierre led down the river.

Soon the yacht loomed up ahead, and when they came within hail a deep voice hailed:

"Ho, the boats!"

"Ay, ay, Conrad," answered Captain Pierre, assuming as much as he could the voice of his former officer, Vance Murell.

"Ay, ay, sah," returned Conrad, and a moment after the boats ran alongside the schooner.

Then over the sides the pirates threw themselves, cutlass and pistols in hand, and Captain Pierre shouted:

"Spring overboard and swim ashore, you black devils, if you don't wish to be cut down, for Captain Pierre, the Sea Marauder, has your vessel."

Surprised wholly, a mere handful to the force that boarded the schooner, and with no white leader, the frightened crew of blacks readily obeyed the order of the pirate and did spring overboard, for they also beheld other boats coming off from the shore.

"Lively, lads! up with that anchor and set sail, for we must get out of this," cried Captain Pierre, and his untried crew sprung to work with a will, just as Peon came over the side with Pearl in his arms, and conscious, but her hands were bound, and a handkerchief drawn tightly across her mouth.

"Hold up that lantern, sir!"

The chief addressed Abram, and the half-dazed negro readily obeyed, holding the large battle-lantern so that its light fell full upon the group.

"Ah! my beautiful Pearl, now you see that you are the Sea Marauder's prisoner, and that I have just captured Merle Monte's treasure schooner to run off with you in," cried the chief, savagely, to the poor girl, who was white with alarm.

"Bear her into the cabin, Peon, and see that she does not escape," continued Captain Pierre, and, as the Indian obeyed, he turned to the duty of getting the schooner under way.

As the anchor left the mud and the vessel felt the current and the wind together, the young man who had acted as leader until the coming of the chief, cried:

"Boats, ho!"

"Ay, ay, sir; the lieutenant is coming, and now I'll capture him," answered Captain Pierre.

"Ho, Conrad, what means this setting

sail?" cried Vance Murell, as he sprung on board.

"It means, Vance Murell, that you are the prisoner of Captain Pierre, the Sea Marauder," answered the chief, confronting him with drawn sword and pistol.

"Ho, you black tars, on board here!" shouted Vance Murell to his crew.

But a blow from behind brought him to the deck, while his negro crew sprung into the river and struck out manfully for the shore, for they saw that the schooner was already in other hands.

And then down the river under clouds of canvas, and driven by a five-knot breeze, the Dragon sped, her destinies guided by the bold Sea Marauder, who had so daringly captured her by his well-laid plot.

Past a boat going down the river, and in which some one recognized her and hailed lustily, then gliding by Monte Manor, and next the city, she held her way, the seamen on the different vessels at anchor in port who saw her fly by, little dreaming that the beautiful vessel was a prize to the daring Marauder of the Sea, who paced her decks with pride at being again able to float his black flag over the seas, and on a craft which he knew could outstrip the fleetest cruiser.

CHAPTER XXI.

MERLE MONTE'S PLEDGE.

THE young, almost boyish, master of the grand Monte Manor, read in his library until a late hour on the night upon which the scenes happened that are related in the foregoing chapter, and he was just about to retire when a visitor was announced.

"Who can it be, Benedict, at this late hour?" he asked.

"The same old gentleman, master, that was here to see you before," was the answer.

"Ah! show him in at once," and the next instant in came Belle Denham in her disguise of an old man.

Without waiting for a welcome, she asked quickly:

"Mr. Monte, have you sent your yacht down the river?"

"By no means."

"She has gone past the city under full sail."

"Ha! are you sure it was the Dragon?" he cried in astonishment.

"It was the Dragon, for I stood on the bank and she went by so near me, that I could almost have sprung on board, for she ran close inshore to avoid some vessels at anchor further out."

"This is startling news."

"Ho, Benedict!"

"Yes, master."

"Send Zekiel to me," and, as the negro disappeared to obey the order, Merle continued:

"You know I told you that the yacht was up at The Retreat?"

"Yes, and that is why I at once sprung into a boat and came up to see you, for her decks were crowded with men, and they were not negroes I am certain, from their voices."

"Then she has been cut out," said Merle, coolly.

"If so, Pierre Dupont has done it, and played me false, as he may have suspected me," said Belle Denham.

"We shall soon know, for Zekiel, my boatman on duty to-night, must have seen her go by, yet it is strange he did not report her."

At that moment Benedict returned, and Merle said quickly:

"Well, where is Zekiel?"

"Don't know, master, for he isn't at the boat-house."

"Not at the boat-house, when it is his night on duty?"

"Then why did you not order the men here?"

"There are none of them there, master."

"By Heaven! but this does look bad—ah! there is a knock."

"Go, Benedict, and see who it is."

Benedict soon returned and ushered in Basil Branch and his wife.

"Well, this is a surprise; but there is no ill news I hope, as I do not see Miss Pearl with you," said Merle, advancing to greet them.

"Why, no, when you requested us not to bring her," answered Basil Branch.

"Not to bring her?"

"So Zekiel told us."

"My dear Mr. Branch, I sent no such word to you, and as you speak of my boatman Zekiel, please tell me where you saw him last?"

"Why, he just brought us down in his boat from the plantation."

"We would have come down in the yacht, but it seems that Captain Murell had gone off with two boats' crews to attack some river pirates, so we came with your boatman."

"But the yacht passed us going down the river like the wind; and though I hailed loudly I got no response, and I concluded Murell was in chase of something."

"Mr. Branch you astound me by all you tell me, sir; and, though delighted to see you, I sent no word for you to come to-night."

"Benedict, order Zekiel here!"

While Benedict was gone Merle explained what Belle Denham had told him about the

yacht, and then had to tell them who the supposed old man was, and that they had a plot together to capture the Sea Marauder.

"Well, Zekiel, what means this going without my orders up to The Retreat Plantation?" said Merle, sternly, as the negro entered, evidently alarmed from the little Benedict had told him.

"Abram told me, sah."

"Abram told you what?"

"He told me, master, that you said to go up to de Retreat and ask Massa and Missus Branch to come right down on important business, and not to bring Missy Pearl."

"Well, the plot thickens. Benedict, call Abram."

But Abram could not be found, but his crew came and told of the old gentleman who had landed that afternoon and had a long talk with him, and Merle said:

"I fear, my friends, there is more deep deviltry in all this—Ha! who is this?" and Merle turned to the door, as suddenly Conrad, the yacht's boatswain, followed by a score of the crew came crowding in under great excitement.

"It is me, master—Conrad, sir, and I have come to tell you that the schooner is captured."

"The schooner is captured; and by whom?" said Merle, calmly, looking at the negro, who was a man of more than ordinary intelligence.

"By the Marauder, sir."

"Ha! that tells the story, and, Belt, you have been deceived," cried Merle, and then he continued:

"Where is Captain Murell, Conrad?"

"I am afraid he was killed, master; at any rate he is a prisoner, and worse still, I saw them carry a lady on board from the shore, and I know it was Miss Pearl."

The poor mother gave a loud shriek, and would have fallen but that her husband caught her in his arms.

"Tell all you know of this affair, Conrad, and lose no time," ordered Merle.

In a few words the negro told his story, and Basil Branch asked:

"Did he say his name was Dupree?"

"Yes, sir, and that he lived above on the other shore, some six miles."

"There is no such planter on the river for miles."

"This is but a part of that devil's plot, Monte."

"Oh, my poor, poor child," groaned Mrs. Branch, nearly heart-broken.

"Bear up, my dear madam," suddenly cried Merle, and his voice rung like a trumpet as he continued:

"For I pledge you my honor that I will rescue your daughter from that man's power,

and that he shall yet swing by the same rope that hanged Brandt, the Buccaneer."

"God bless you for those words," said the unhappy woman.

"Come, Mr. Branch, I shall have to ask you to be my lieutenant, and you, Miss Denham, remain here in my house with Mrs. Branch, for she will need your care.

"Come, Conrad, get all your men together, and, Zekiel, summon my boats' crews, too, and all the slaves that can be spared from the place and have them come to the city in boats."

Five minutes after Merle Monte and Basil Branch were going down the river in a light skiff, rowed by Mezrak, and shortly after five boats left the landing under the charge of Conrad, and they contained a hundred slaves, brave, and willing to follow their young master wherever he might lead them, while the boatswain and those that had been the crew of the Dragon were most anxious to redeem themselves and aid in the recapture of their beautiful vessel, which they had lost without firing a shot, but which, under the circumstances, Merle did not blame them for.

CHAPTER XXII.

MERLE MONTE AT WORK.

UPON reaching the city landing, Merle Monte bade Mezrak row on board of a brigantine that was anchored near.

Basil Branch could not but remark upon her beauty of outline as they drew near, and Merle said:

"She is a craft just built at Baltimore and brought here to be put upon the line between here and Havana, and when sailing in the Dragon the other day I met her, with her owners on board, trying her speed. It was really wonderful, and she held her own with the Dragon before the wind, and with the wind on our quarter, she really dropped the schooner into her wake, and she was not handled well, either, so she is the craft I intend to take."

"But can you get her?"

"I shall do so at any rate," was the firm reply.

"But is she armed?"

"No, but Brandt's brig yonder is," and Merle pointed to the Huntress at anchor near.

"But she is stripped of her sails."

"True; but her guns, arms and ammunition are on board?"

"Way enough, Mezrak."

The boat ran alongside the brigantine, and the sleepy watch on board was suddenly confronted by Merle and Basil Branch.

"Well, who are you?" he asked.

"My name is Merle Monte, and I wish to see your captain."

"He has gone to bed."

"Wake him up, and lose no time, my man."

"Are you river officers?"

"It matters not, obey me."

The man stepped to the companionway and called his captain, and by the time he got out of his berth, Merle and Basil Branch met him in the cabin.

"Captain, I have little time to dally, sir, so I will tell you that my schooner, the Dragon, has been seized by Captain Pierre, the Sea Marauder, and run off to sea, and I wish to borrow your vessel to go in pursuit."

"Who are you, sir?" said the astonished captain, eying the boyish intruder.

"My name is Merle Monte."

"Ah! the Prince."

"If so you wish to call me, yes; but let me have your vessel, please."

"I have but a crew of six men on board."

"I have a hundred men coming down the river now."

"But my vessel is not armed."

"I can get guns for her."

"Yet, my dear sir, I have no authority to do this, and it will be a day or two before you can arm her."

"My dear captain, I will arm her within three hours, and as for authority—see here."

"What is it?"

"You see in my hand a roll of bank-notes amounting to five times the value of the brigantine. Take them as security, and when you see your agents tell them to take out the value of the vessel as charter money, and keep the balance for my return. If I should not come back, then the whole amount is for the owners and yourself."

"But, my dear sir—"

"But, my dear captain, I will stand no more nonsense. I have told you what I will do, and here is the money. Obey me and take it, or I shall make you prisoner, and keep you so until I send you back in the brig Huntress, which I intend to take with me."

"Well, sir, I can do no more than yield, though this seems a high-handed affair."

"Were not your vessel the fleetest craft in the harbor. I would not disturb you, sir. Mr. Branch, please see that Mezrak bails the boats as they come down, and order them on board."

Basil Branch left the cabin, to find that Mezrak had already sighted the boats and halted them.

"Come on board, men—and to work!" he ordered; and Merle Monte coming from the cabin, sail was set, the cable was slipped, and taking the helm himself, the daring

youth laid the brigantine alongside of the brig that had been seized by Brandt the Buccaneer.

"Spring upon her decks, boys, and make her fast to the brigantine! That is the way; now slip her cable, and Conrad, take her wheel and steer in unison with the helmsman of the brigantine," and Merle called to two of his black crew to take the wheel.

The wind was blowing down the river, and the brigantine under full canvas, carried both vessels swiftly along, while Merle and Basil Branch called the crew to transfer the heavy guns from one craft to the other.

The brigantine had been pierced for guns, but her owners had decided not to arm her, after the capture of Brandt the Buccaneer.

But the small-arms of the brig, and the ammunition was quickly transferred to the brigantine, and ropes, with blocks and tackle being rigged between the two vessels, the heavy cannon, with the large force working upon them, were carried from deck to deck with dispatch, and far less trouble than was deemed possible.

And all the while the brigantine and brig were sailing side by side, lashed together, and losing no time.

At last, and before the glimmer of dawn in the east, the transfer of guns was complete, and Merle turned to the still astonished captain of the brigantine, and said:

"Now, captain, I will leave you and your crew upon the brig, and you better drop anchor as soon as we cut away.

"You can find enough canvas to rig working sails, and make your way back to the city, and report what has occurred."

"I fear you will get yourself into trouble, Mr. Monte," said the captain.

"Not in the least, sir, for I am not stealing your vessel, or causing bloodshed in seizing her.

"I merely charter her, and leave five times her value in your hands for her owners.

"Is all ready, Mr. Branch, to cut away?"

"Ay, ay, sir," came the answer.

"Then get your crew on the brig, captain, at once."

"I will, sir, and success to your voyage, for you deserve it," responded the captain, and calling to his men, he sprung on board the Huntress, and then loud rung Merle's order:

"Cut away there!"

A few sharp blows upon the lashings, and the brigantine shot ahead, while the brig swung off, and as her anchor was let fall, she swerved round with her bows up-stream.

And while the brigantine sped away like the wind, those on the brig went to work to rig what canvas could be set upon the craft, and after a couple of hours' work spread

enough sail to beat slowly back to the city, where, upon their arrival, the startling tidings were made known of the Sea Marauder's bold capture of the Dragon, and Merle Monte's wonderful and quick pursuit of the pirate with a vessel he had pressed into service, a crew of his own slaves, and guns taken from the dismantled brig Huntress.

But all admitted that the Sea Marauder had a dangerous foe in his wake.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE SEA MARAUDER.

THE captured Dragon went by the city like a frightened bird, and held on down the river for the open waters of the Gulf, for Captain Pierre well knew his danger should he meet an American cruiser coming up.

Once he had dropped New Orleans astern, he at once set to work to make himself at home on his new craft, his first duty being to appoint officers from the crew.

This done he overhauled the craft from stem to stern, deck to hold, to see just what stores, ammunition, and the most important of all, treasure, were on board.

He found that Merle Monte had the schooner well stored for a long cruise, perfectly armed, and his heart bounded with joy, as he raised the hatch in the cabin floor, beneath the velvet carpet, and beheld boxes securely fastened with iron hoops, which he knew could be nothing else than the treasure so long coveted and hunted for by many.

When the dawn came and the schooner bounded over the blue waters of the Gulf, Captain Pierre was in his element.

It had been his intention to give up piracy upon the capture of the treasure of Merle Monte, and to seek other lands to enjoy it, letting his officers and crew have the schooner to continue their career of crime if so they wished.

But the old Adam was in him strong, and he felt that his appetite for robbery upon the high seas was not by any means satiated, although he believed he held millions of gold beneath his feet.

No, his vessel was so fast, so strong, and his crew so willing, he would just make a few captures before he left off from hoisting the black flag.

Knowing that the Sea Wolf was not in port, that the brig Huntress, the cutter Gold Hunter and his own vessel, the Sea Marauder, had been dismantled, he had no fear of immediate pursuit.

Then, too, he believed he had crippled Merle Monte, financially, by running off with his treasure, and he would be unable to pursue him as otherwise he might have done.

With feelings of perfect contentment with

himself he descended to the cabin to breakfast, which had been prepared by a good cook, whom the thoughtful Peon had shipped for just such service, while he was to act in the capacity of steward, valet, and all else that Captain Pierre might need him for.

In the cabin he found Vance Murell, pale but calm, and who had, by his orders, been relieved of his irons.

"Well, Mr. Murell, we meet again," he said, with a smile.

Vance Murell bowed.

"And under different circumstances than on our last meeting?"

"Yes, sir."

"You have given up piracy, I hear?"

"I have, sir, and am heartily ashamed of myself that, even in my desperate circumstances, I was so lost to honor as to become an outlaw."

"You may turn preacher yet, if you get the chance, but it is my intention not to give you the chance, for, Vance Murell, you deserted me, went over to the enemy, and you rose while I sunk, and I hate fortune to favor others while it turns the cold shoulder upon me."

"So, my dear ex-lieutenant, you shall be treated with every courtesy, *for just one month*, and then, as I intend to give up piracy, I shall begin my reformation by hanging you to the yard-arm."

"As you please, sir, for you have the power; but I beg you to spare the poor girl who lies in yonder state-room, and whom you have torn from her parents," pleaded Vance Murell, earnestly.

"Ah! you are her lover, I remember; but I shall not spare her, for it is my intention to make her my wife."

"*Your wife?*" gasped Vance Murell.

"Yes, for I loved her mother long years before her, and she cast me off and married Basil Branch, who had already given me cause to hate him."

"Now I hate them both, and my revenge shall be to marry their daughter."

"How they will sorrow over the thought that their daughter is the bride of a pirate, and that pirate Pierre Dupont the old Marauder of the Mississippi."

"Ha! ha! ha! I have rare sport in store, rare joy, in my sweet revenge," and Captain Pierre sat down to his breakfast with evident relish, unmindful of the moans that came from the state-room on the port side, and the white, savage face of Vance Murell that was turned upon him.

After a hearty meal the cruel chief went on deck, and instantly out of the cabin came poor Pearl, looking beautiful in her grief, and showing signs of bitter weeping.

"Thank God he has gone!" she cried.

"Be hopeful, for Merle Monte will not desert us," said Vance, in a kindly tone.

"I do not despair, for Mr. Monte has shown himself too true a friend to desert us now," answered Pearl, and, determined to keep up her strength, she sat down to table, and forced herself to eat something.

And thus several days passed away, still no vessel came in sight that seemed in reach of the fugitive Dragon, and hope almost faded from the hearts of Vance and Pearl, whom Captain Pierre left together, to make the parting, when it should come, still more painful.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE PLEDGE REDEEMED.

"SAIL, ho!"

It was a month since the flight of the Dragon from port, and the last day which Captain Pierre was to devote to piracy.

The next day was to be a grand one for all on the schooner, for Captain Pierre had captured a number of vessels, and upon one had found a priest, whom he had at once taken possession of to further his own sinister purpose.

That purpose was to make him marry him to Pearl, his poor captive, after which the booty was to be divided, and then Vance Murell was to be strung up in the rigging.

"Oh, he will not do that murder," cried Pearl, as she sat in the cabin with Vance Murell, the last day of grace.

"Yes, he will, Pearl, for he will be mad with rage, when he unpacks those boxes to find out that Captain Monte secretly removed from them all the treasure, but left them to appear as though they still held it."

"Then his rage will know no bounds, and I'll be hanged," said Vance, sadly.

Pearl was about to reply, when the cry came from the deck of:

"Sail ho!"

Instantly Captain Pierre was on the alert, for he hoped to make one more capture upon his last day of piracy.

"Square away for her, helmsman, for she is evidently a merchantman, and looks like a New Orleans and Havana packet," he cried.

So the Dragon was put on a course for the stranger, which at first seemed to head to meet her, and then, as though alarmed at her rakish look, turned to fly.

Instantly sail was crowded upon the Dragon, and although the chase had set all her canvas, she was rapidly overhauled.

"It is strange that so trim-looking a craft sails so slowly," said Captain Pierre, who was most attentively regarding the stranger.

"She is unarmed and has a small crew, as well as I can judge, so in this light wind we will run to windward and lay the schooner

alongside, if she does not come to," continued Captain Pierre.

And after an hour more the stranger came to, in obedience to a shot from the Dragon, which ran up under shortened sail, her men with her guns, and was laid alongside of the captured craft with great skill.

Captain Pierre and his boarders were about to spring upon the decks of the stranger when a tall form suddenly bounded over the high bulwarks, cutlass in one hand and pistol in the other, and confronted the pirate chief, while at his back came a mass of men as black as ebony.

Forward also was another boarding party of the same sable hue, yet led by a white-headed man, with a livid, stern face.

As the one who headed the first party of boarders faced Captain Pierre he shouted in ringing tones:

"Ho! Sir Sea Robber, I have come for my schooner, and I bring a rope for your neck!"

It was Merle Monte, and his negro crew, and with the guns in the hold, the men hidden away, and chains out to check the speed of the beautiful brigantine, they had led Captain Pierre into a trap.

So astounded was Captain Pierre, that Merle struck his sword aside before he could use it, and knocked the pistol from his grasp.

"Seize him, Mezrak!"

"Yes, master," and Mezrak threw himself upon the chief, and the click, click of irons showed that he was secured, and then the amazed, panic-stricken pirates were swept along the deck and remorselessly cut down, or sprung into the sea, preferring death by drowning than at the edge of the cutlass.

And aft, a touching scene was transpiring, for Vance Murell, who had rushed on deck at the beginning of the fight, and thrown in the weight of his arm, now unlocked the companionway and led forth Pearl, who threw herself weeping into the arms of her father.

At once the two vessels were put away for New Orleans, and the Dragon swept up to the city with the Sea Marauder, as had been Brandt, the Buccaneer, swinging in her rigging.

Thus Merle Monte kept his pledge, and more, he saw how dearly Vance Murell loved Pearl, and that she at least most kindly regarded him, and he yielded her to the young officer, though she had won his heart from the first.

And at Monte Manor there was a double wedding for Belle Denham was also made the bride of Captain Mayo Meredith, and to the two couples, Merle Monte gave a golden souvenir well worthy of his noble nature, which always sacrificed self for those he loved.

THE END.

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